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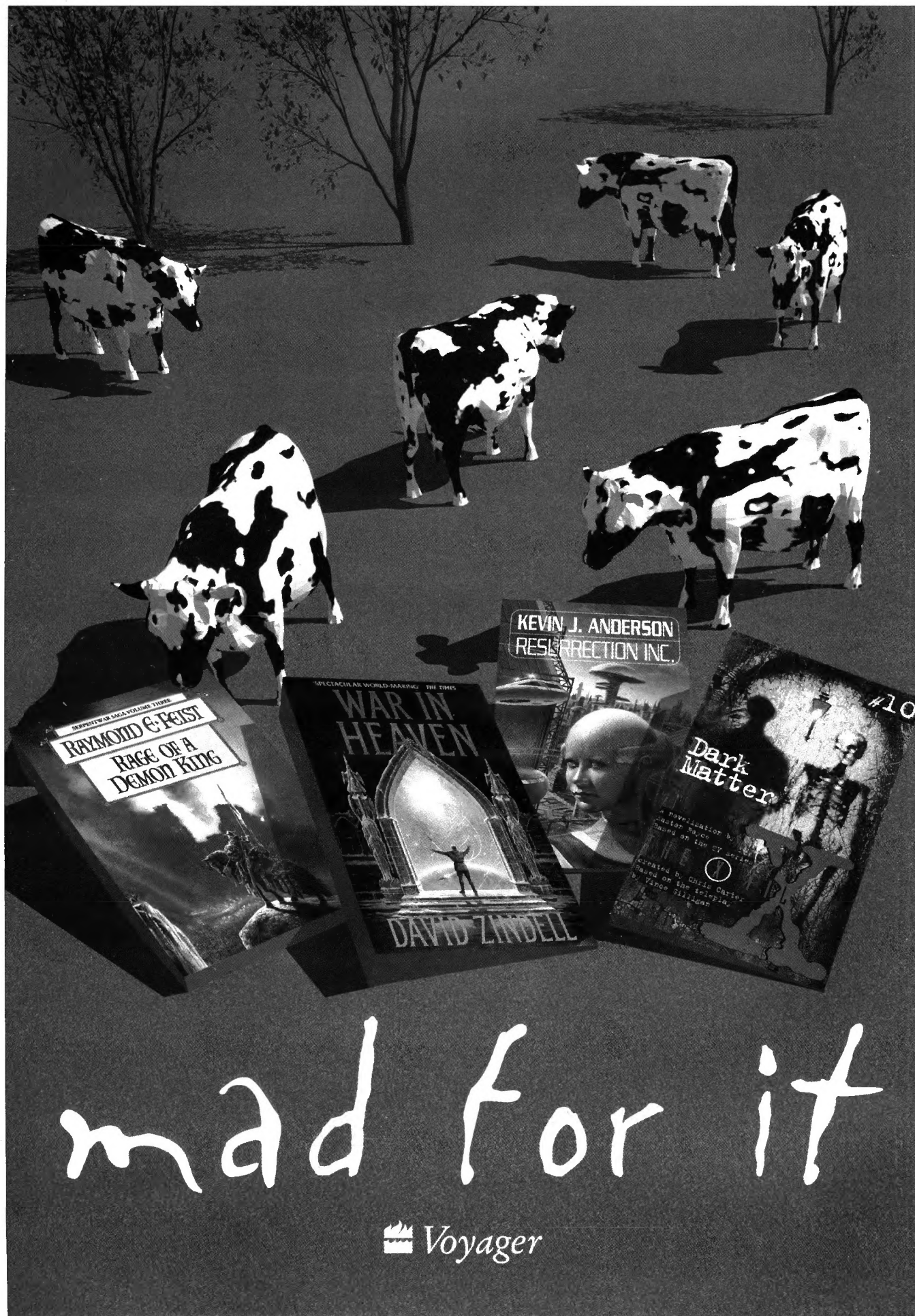
'Jedella Ghost'

by
Tanith Lee



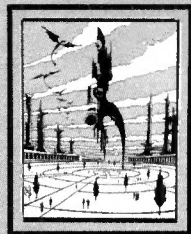
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mad for it

 Voyager



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InterZone

September 1998

135

science fiction & fantasy

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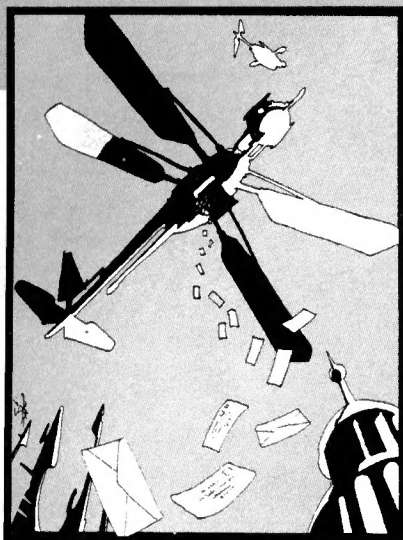
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and Peace, universally regarded as a masterpiece, to paperback-original Regency romances or Napoleonic naval adventures of no literary ambition whatsoever. It's the same with science fiction: some works are sf and bad, while others are sf and good, in exactly the same way as historical novels can be good or bad or anything in between. The simple descriptive "sf" doesn't have to carry a literary judgment, but smart-arse journalists nevertheless feel the need to kick the genre in its entirety, mainly for the sake of easy laughs. It's not a new phenomenon (it has been going on for 50 years) but perhaps it has got worse in recent times because so many other traditional targets – the opposite sex, old people, ethnic or regional minorities, people with disabilities, persons of differing sexual persuasion, etc, etc – are now regarded as off-limits as subjects for "humorous" journalistic sniping. In an indirect sense, do we have Political Correctness to blame for this situation?

Designer: The offending article was published in the 170th anniversary issue of *The Spectator*. Being a subscriber, I wrote a letter of complaint. They have not yet seen fit to publish it: the relevant passage follows:

*As editors of a fellow magazine devoted to fine writing and incisive thought, we write more in sorrow than in anger at the slur cast on our area of interest.... When Michael Harrington makes the astonishing claim that Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* is "too good to be SF," he repeats a libel that we had thought safely disposed of nearly 40 years ago by Kingsley Amis. In his introduction to *New Maps of Hell* (1960), Amis writes,*

...what attracts people to science fiction is not in the first place literary quality in the accustomed sense of that term. But ... they may well come to find such quality there, perhaps in an unaccustomed form, if they ever take the trouble to look for it.

The Spectator has let us down doubly here, for its commentators are usually both learned in, and lovers of, their subjects. It is hard to imagine Ursula Buchan writing "it is too good to be a flower," or Paul Johnson inveighing "it is too good to be a watercolour."

*Science fiction is a value-neutral term; it simply indicates an area of endeavour. Harrington clearly implies that the converse of his comment – that if it is science fiction, it can't be good – is true, and thus reduces the reputations of both *The Spectator* and sf at a stroke. It is plain to any disinterested*

observer that sf is flourishing. Three different publishing houses have recently launched specialist sf imprints; many of the most popular films and television programmes are overtly science fiction; and there is an entire cable channel devoted to sf with its own immensely popular website. Even the Radio Times has seen fit to give sf its own page (although, commendably, Radio 4 resolutely mixes sf in with its other programming without comment).

Over the past 16 years, our magazine has quietly thrived, promoting excellence within sf by publishing stories from most of the leading authors of science fiction alive, among them Brian Aldiss and J.G. Ballard. We intend and expect to continue well into the next century, alongside the general growth of interest in sf, and in spite of the comments of the likes of Michael Harrington. ... In the meantime, we would rather wait a further 170 years than see another such ill-informed farrago.

Dear David:

Another excellent issue of *Interzone* [number 133]. Enjoyed your piece on Disch's book, and thanks for correcting the various errors. I've long thought that biography is deeply untrustworthy on the whole, and that the recollections of friends and acquaintances should be discounted, in the way that senior police officers discount eye-witnesses who claim that "I was sitting next to the gunman when he stood up and shot the pilot." You were quite right to spot Disch's errors – all petty, but accumulated inaccuracies make one suspicious of everything else. No, I have never driven a sports car, the last vehicle a single parent with three small children would choose – from the 60s to the present I've generally had family saloons. Incidentally, I've never driven dangerously, and have even been a bit slow and plodding as a driver. *The Kindness of Women* isn't trustworthy from the point of view of literal biography – it's my life seen through the mirror of the fiction prompted by that life, even though some scenes are literally as accurate as I could make them.

J. G. Ballard
Shepperton, Middlesex

Dear Editors:

Brian Stableford's insightful essay on sf legend John W. Campbell (*Interzone* 133) has forced me to reflect on what must surely be one of the greatest sf anthologies ever assembled. I speak of *The John W. Campbell Memorial Anthology*, edited by Harry Harrison and published in 1974 by Sphere. Each story is preceded by a

Dear Editors:

The July 4th, 1998, issue of the British weekly *The Spectator* carries a screed by some benighted illiterate named Michael Harrington, who condemns all science fiction (and predicts its demise) because it hasn't come up with any new ideas since the invention of Mr Spock (which he thinks was a new idea at the time). Mr Harrington's sole apparent qualification for writing this article is total ignorance of the subject matter. The most recent sf novel he seems to have read is Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953). He shows no familiarity with the written literature beyond that, no awareness of Dick, Wolfe, Le Guin, Gibson, Disch, or some others who might be suspected of literary excellence or cultural importance.

Given the level of expertise required of its writers, it would seem that *The Spectator* has fallen on hard times since its heyday in the 18th century, and is now no more worthy of serious consideration (and contains fewer interesting photos) than a British tabloid.

Maybe the British sf community ought to respond with ridicule. It might be amusing and instructive to institute the Michael Harrington Award for spectacularly ignorant coverage of sf in the mainstream media. The first one, of course, should go to Harrington himself. The symbol of the award should be a dunce cap with fins.

Darrell Schweitzer
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Editor: I've now seen the article you refer to, and agree that it is a very irritating piece (but no doubt it was intended to have just that effect). Why can't science fiction be taken by these mainstream commentators as a value-neutral literary term, like, say, the phrase "historical novel"? Historical fiction ranges from Tolstoy's War

passage explaining the contributors' associations with Campbell, and how he affected their respective works. It is an indispensable volume, and well worth looking out for in charity shops (which is probably the only place you will find it, these days). Among Campbell's many idiosyncrasies, and his encouragement of the work of fellow writers such as Cogswell, Thomas, Reynolds and Sturgeon, it also notes his controversial decision to change the name of *Astounding* magazine to *Analog Science Fact – Science Fiction*.

I would like to add my vote to the continuation of Brian's Stableford's "Creators of Science Fiction" series – a much better bet than Gary Westfahl's essays, stale or otherwise...

David L. Stone
Ramsgate, Kent

Dear Editors:

It was kind of Brian Stableford to give a footnote to *Distress* in his discussion of Campbell's supposed Asperger's Syndrome, but the philosophy of "Voluntary Autism" in the novel had nothing to do with the benefits of being narrowly focused on a specific vocation. The thesis of the Voluntary Autists was that ordinary human intimacy involves an illusion of having more knowledge about other people's state of mind than we actually possess; having gained this insight from their partial autism, the Voluntary Autists lobbied for the right to have surgery that would render them fully autistic, rather than surgery that would cure them by giving them the same illusion as everyone else.

Greg Egan
Perth, Australia

Dear Editors:

David Mathew's interview with Dennis Etchison (*Interzone* 133) was excellent, a different and effective style compared to the usual question-and-answer sessions. I'd like to see more of this sort of interview: it works, it's immediate and involving, as was Keith Brooke's article on his e-zine *infinity plus*.

Brian Stableford's article on John W. Campbell was in need of editing attention – too many "quasi-Stapledonians" by far. I didn't get half as much out of this expanded bibliography as I did from David Mathew's article on Etchison. John Campbell is as much of a mystery as ever – I might know a bit more about what he did, but nothing about why. Topping and tailing the article with spurious paragraphs on Asperger's Syndrome that had no bearing on Campbell himself bothered me, and I'm surprised you let the

lunacy of suggesting that any form of mental disorder is desirable through at all. Maybe it's clever, maybe you're just trying to be controversial, or maybe living next door to a family with an autistic child has forced me to have a better understanding of what a sad tragedy it is for any individual when they cannot understand other people's feelings and find answering the simplest questions – "how are you?" – an unbearable torture.

"Wallpaper" by Susan Beetlestone and Gary Couzens's "Rachael" were two neat, self-contained stories. Stephen Baxter's "The Barrier" was disappointing because it was just another "barrier round the solar system" story. What was especially good to see were the two stories from France and Germany. Do you remember Maxim Jakubowski's *Twenty Houses of the Zodiac*? A fine anthology of fantasy and sf stories from all over the world.

Dave Gullen
dave@gullen.demon.co.uk

Editor: Yes, we remember the Jakubowski anthology, which appeared in 1979. There have been very few anthologies of foreign-language science fiction published in English since then. There were two volumes entitled *Terra SF: The Year's Best European SF*, edited by Richard D. Nolane and published by DAW Books in 1981 and 1983, and there was *The Penguin World Omnibus of Science Fiction* edited by Brian Aldiss and Sam Lundwall in 1986 (a book rather similar to Jakubowski's). And that's it: nothing more in the last 12 years! It's high time there was a "Mammoth Book of World SF" or an "Oxford Book of European SF" – or both. How about it, publishers? (Would there be sufficient reader support in the English-speaking countries, though? *Interzone* readers' opinions are welcomed – both on the matter of such anthologies, and on the subject of whether or not we should endeavour to publish more translated sf in this magazine.)

Dear Editors:

Today I picked up my copy of *Interzone*, the first issue I've read for a few months, and a couple of things struck me. I'd like to share these thoughts with you.

As a university student a couple of years ago I had free internet access, and as such had my fill of that world. Three years of frequent e-mail, WWW and Telnet left me saturated with a virtual world that thought it was the only mode of existence. And so it was with a perverse sense of fascination and a great deal of hesitation that a few weeks ago I found myself once

more entering into that world, and getting internet access of my own.

One thing that must surely strike anyone who has ever used the World Wide Web or e-mail is the proliferation of these new addresses as they permeate hitherto staid and respectable media. TV programmes, magazines and newspapers, even soft drinks, now all have their own Web sites, and plaster the address about like a wonderful new badge that says "Product of the future!" Now of course in the vast majority of cases one wonders just why we need a Web site for, say, Sprite, *Hello!* magazine, or the Evans store (for the fuller-figured lady)... but *Interzone*? It seems almost anachronistic for a magazine, much of whose prose is so rooted in technology, communication, the future, that even the one-time e-mail address has faded from view.

It seems puzzling to me that there is this apparent lack in the magazine's interface with the world. Surely for a magazine that is rarely to be seen on the newsstand, such potentially widespread and cost-effective means of advertising as the WWW are not to be overlooked. Having neither e-mail nor a website address, the magazine seems somehow isolated, maybe even quaint. I say this not through spite, but with regret. I feel that *Interzone* is a very fine publication, and would hate to lose it through lack of support.

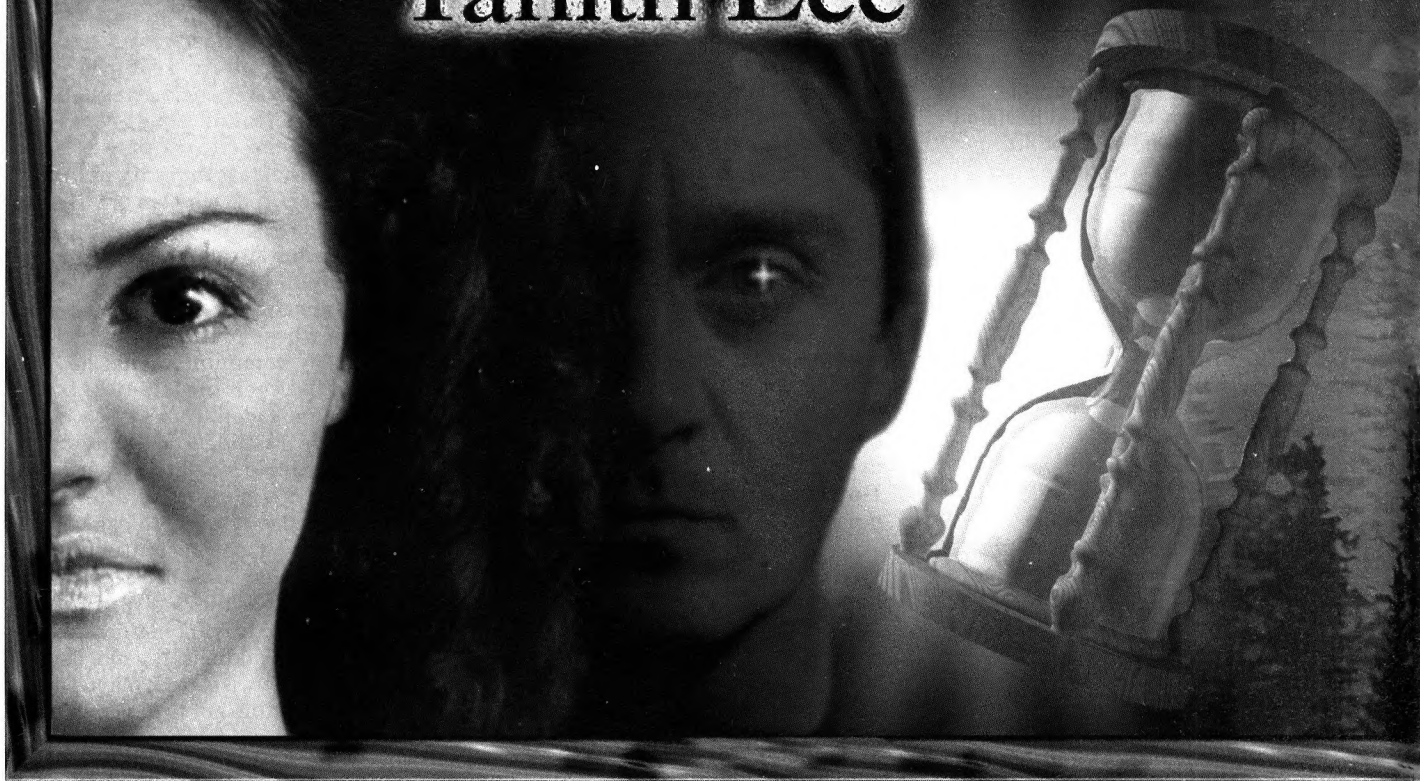
David Alexander
Norwich
dalexand@argonet.co.uk

Designer: *Interzone* does have its own e-mail address, but we don't accentuate it for fear of inundation with electronic story submissions. As submissions are delivered to the Assistant Editors for reading and comment, they have to be hard copy, and there are just not enough hours in the day, nor shekels in the budget, to print out an equivalent of the amount of hard copy stories we receive. That said, we do welcome letters via e-mail, and the address for such is interzone@cix.co.uk

As for a web-site, well, yes, you have a point. However, as the designer of the magazine I have to say that a presence on the web per se doesn't sell anything; an effective web site would need to be properly designed to draw in casual surfers, attended to on a daily basis, and updated regularly, and we simply haven't had the time to work up anything either design- or infrastructure-wise thus far. On the other hand, Lee Montgomerie has created an excellent unofficial *Interzone* website at www.riviera.demon.co.uk/interzon.htm that contains a full index and synopses of recent issues.

Jedella Ghost

Tanith Lee



That fall morning, Luke Baynes had been staying a night with his grandmother up on the ridge, and he was tramping back to town through the woods. It was about an hour after sun-up, and the soft level light was caught broadcast in all the trees, molasses-red and honey-yellow. The birds sang, and squirrels played across the tracks. As he stepped on to the road above the river, Luke looked down into the valley. There was an ebbing mist, sun-touched like a bridal veil, and out of this he saw her come walking, up from the river, like a ghost. He knew at once she was a stranger, and she was young, pale and slight in an old-fashioned long dark dress. Her hair was dark, too, hanging down her back like a child's. As she got closer he saw she was about 18, a young woman. She had, he said, not a pretty face, but serene, pleasing; he liked to look at her. And she, as she came up to him, looked straight at him, not boldly or rudely, but with an open interest. Luke took off his hat, and said, "Good morning." And the girl nodded. She said, "Is there a house near here?" Luke said there was, several houses, the town was just along the way. She nodded again, and thanked him. It was, he said, a lovely voice, all musical and lilting upward, like a smile. But then she went and sat at the roadside, where a tree had been cut and left a stump. She looked away from him now, up into the branches. It was as if there was nothing more to say. He did ask if he could assist her. She answered at

once, "No, thank you." And so, after a moment, he left her there, though he was not sure he should do. But she did not appear concerned or worried.

"She had the strangest shoes," he said.

"Her shoes?" I asked. Luke had never seemed a man for noting the footwear of women, or of anyone.

"They were the colours of the woods," he said, "crimson and gold and green. And – they seemed to me like they were made of glass."

"Cinderella," I said, "run off from the ball."

"But she had on both," he said, and grinned.

After this we went for coffee and cake at Millie's.

I had no doubt he had seen this woman, but I thought perhaps he had made more of her than there was. Because I am a writer people sometimes try to work spells on me – Oh, John Cross, this will interest you. You can *write* about this. It does them credit, really, to make their imaginations work. But they should take up the pen, not I. Usually, I have enough ideas of my own.

About ten, I went back to my room to work, and did not come out again until three. And then I too saw Luke's lady of the mist. She was standing in the square, under the old cobweb trees, looking up at the white tower of the church, on which the clock was striking the hour.

People going about were glancing at her curiously, and even the old-timers on the bench outside the stables were eying her. She was a stranger, and graceful



Illustrations by Dominic Harman

as a lily. And sure enough, she seemed to have on sparkling stained-glass shoes.

When the clock stopped, she turned and looked around her. Do any of us look about that way? Human things are cautious, circumspect – or conversely arrogant. And she was none of these. She looked the way a child does, openly, perhaps not quite at ease, but not on guard. And then she saw – evidently she saw – the old men on the bench, Will Marks and Homer Avory and Nut Warren. She became very still, gazing at them, until they in turn grew uneasy. They did not know what to do, I could see, and Nut, who was coming on for 90 years, he turned belligerent.

I stepped out and crossed the square, and came right up to her, standing between her and the old boys.

"Welcome to our town. My name's John Cross."

"I'm Jedella," she said at once.

"I'm glad to meet you. Can I help?"

"I'm lost," she said. I could not think at once what to say. Those that are lost do not speak in this way. I knew it even then. Jedella said presently, "You see, I've lived all my life in one place, and now – here I am."

"Do you have kin here?"

"Kin?" she said. "I have no kin."

"I'm sorry. But is there someone –?"

"No," she said. "Oh, I'm tired. I'd like a drink of water. To sit down."

I said, and I thought myself even then hard and

cruel, "Your shoes."

"Oh. That was my fault. I should have chosen something else."

"Are they glass?"

"I don't know," she said.

I took her straight across to Millie's, and in the big room sat her at a table, and when the coffee came, she drank it down. She seemed comfortable with coffee, and I was surprised. I had already realized, maybe, that the things of civilized life were not quite familiar to her.

Hannah returned and refilled our cups – Jedella had refused my offer of food. But as Hannah went away, Jedella looked after her. The look was deep and sombre. She had eyes, Jedella, like the rivers of the Greek Hell – melancholy, and so dark.

"What's wrong with her?"

"With –?"

"With that woman who brought the coffee."

Hannah was a robust creature, about 40. She was the wife of Abel Sorrensen, and had five children, all bright and sound – a happy woman, a nice woman. I had never seen her sick or languishing.

"Hannah Sorrensen is just fine."

"But –" said Jedella. She stared at me, then the stare became a gaze. "Oh, those men outside..."

"The old men on the bench," I said.

Jedella said, "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be impertinent."

I said, squaring my shoulders, "I think you should

see Doc McIvor. He's bound to have some plan of how to go on."

I had formed the impression she was a little mad. And, I confess, I wondered how she would react to the notion of a doctor.

But Jedella smiled at me, and then I saw what Luke had only heard in her voice. Her smile made her beautiful. For a moment I saw her as my muse. I wondered if I would fall in love with her, and feed upon her mystery. The writer can be selfish. But, in my own defence, I knew that here was something rare, precious – rich and strange.

"Of course I'll see him," she said. "I have no one, and nowhere to go. How kind you are."

What happens when the doctor is sick? An old adage to be sure. But Doc McIvor had gone to visit his niece in the city, who was expecting her first baby. Everyone knew but me. But then, I had only lived in the town for five years.

I did not want, I admit, to give Jedella, with her Lethe eyes and Cinderella shoes and heavenly smile, over to the law, so I took her to my rooming-house, and there Abigail Anchor came sweeping forth in her purple dress.

"I can give her that little room on the west side," said Abigail. "This girl has run away. I know it."

"Do you think so?" I asked.

"Oh, to be sure. Her daddy is some harsh man. Perhaps forcing her to marry. I won't sit in judgement, Mr Cross. Indeed, Mr Cross, you may know more than you say. But I won't ask it –"

"I don't know anything, Mrs Anchor."

"That's as you say, Mr Cross."

I met Luke Baynes that night in the Tavern. We had a beer. He grinned at me again.

"They're talking. Your sweetheart's stashed away at Ma Anchor's."

"Yours and mine. You saw her first."

"Then it is the girl with glass shoes."

"A strange one," I said. "She keeps to herself. But when I came out tonight, she was at her window and the blind was raised. She was looking along the street."

Luke said, "Don't you know anything?"

"Not a thing. Abigail has sheltered her from the goodness of her heart. Her name's Jedella."

"I don't believe," said Luke, "she's real. She's a ghost."

"I took her arm," I said. "She's real as you or I."

"What is it then?" he said.

"I think she's crazy. A little crazy. Probably someone will come after her. She can't have come far."

"But," he said, "she's – *wonderful*."

"Yes," I said. "A fascinating woman. The woman you can't have is always fascinating."

"You're too clever," he said. "I fancy going courting."

"Don't," I said. I frowned into my drink. "Don't."

Two weeks passed, and Jedella lived in the room on the west side of the Anchor house. She gave no trouble, and I had had a word with Abigail about the rent. I believe Abigail helped with any female things that Jedella might have needed, and certainly, I was presented with a bill before too long. My trade had brought me moderate success, and I did not flinch.

Otherwise, I saw no reason to interfere. I gathered

from Abigail that Jedella did not much wish to go out, yet seemed quite well. She ate her meals in private, and enjoyed the services of the house. Now and then I noted Jedella at her window, gazing along the street. Once I lifted my hand, but she did not respond. I let it go at that.

Of course, word had got around about the unknown young woman. I was sometimes pestered, but knowing next to nothing myself, could be of little assistance.

Did I want to draw Jedella out? Rather, I was inclined to avoid her. Real life that takes the form of a story, or appears to, is so often disappointing. Or, if one learns some gem, must one become a traitor who can no longer be trusted with anything? I prefer to invent, and that keeps me busy enough.

Luke did try to introduce himself to the woman on the west side. He took her flowers one afternoon, and a box of sweets in a green bow another. But, Jedella apparently seemed only amazed. She did not respond as a woman should, hopefully a flirtatious, willing woman. He was baffled, and retreated, to the relief of the two or three young ladies of the town who had such hopes of him, some day.

On the last Friday of that second week, just as I had finished a long story for the *Post*, I heard at Millie's that Homer Avory had died in his bed. He was nearly 80, which for the town is quite a youngster, and his daughter was in a rage, it seemed, for she had always loved him and had been planning a birthday dinner.

Everyone went to a funeral then, and presently I heard it was fixed for Tuesday. I looked out my black suit with a sensation of the droll and the sad. My father had once warned me, "You don't feel a death, John, not truly, till you start to feel your own." He was 50 when he said this, and he died two years after, so I may not argue. But I felt it was a shame about Homer, and about his daughter, who was 60 herself, and had lost her husband ten months before to a fever.

On Monday evening I was reading some books that had come in the mail, when a light knock sounded on my door.

It was not Abigail, evidently, who thundered, nor Luke, who burst in. I went to see, and there stood the apparition called Jedella, still in her dark dress, but with a new pair of simple shoes. Her hair was done up on her head.

"Good evening, Miss Jedella. Can I help you?"

"Mr Cross," she said, "something is happening tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Oh, do you mean poor old Homer's funeral?"

"That," she said, "is what Abigail Anchor called it."

"Abigail? Well, what else. A burial, a funeral."

She stared straight at me. She said, still and low, "But what is that?"

Abigail had her rules, but it was just light. I drew Jedella into the room and left the door an inch ajar.

I made her sit down in my comfortable chair, and moved the books.

"How do you mean, Miss Jedella?"

She seemed for a moment disturbed. Then she composed her pale face and said, "They say the – old man – has *died*."

"He has."

"Was he one of the three men I saw in the square that day?"

"Yes, just so."

"He has some terrible illness," she said. She looked about distractedly. "Am I right?"

This unnerved me. I could not put it together. I recalled, I had thought her slightly insane. I said, quietly, "Unfortunately, he was old, and so he died. But, please believe, he had no ailment. He passed away peacefully in his sleep, I gather."

"But what do you mean?" she said.

"He's dead," I answered. "I'm afraid it happens." I had intended irony, but she gazed at me with such pathos, I felt myself colour, as if I had insulted her. I did not know what to say next. She spoke first.

"This funeral, what is it?"

"Jedella," I said firmly, "do you say you don't know what a funeral is?"

"No," said Jedella, "I have no idea."

If I had been three years younger, I suspect I would have thought myself the victim or some game. But peculiar things happen. Oddities, differences.

I sat down in the other chair.

"When a man dies, we put him in the earth. If you are religious, you reckon he waits there for the last trumpet, which summons him up to God."

"In the earth," she said. "But how can he stand it – is it some punishment?"

"He's dead," I replied, like stone. "He won't know."

"How can he not know?"

In the window, the light of day was going out. And it came to me, as sometimes it did when a child, that perhaps this was the end, and the sun would never return.

In ten minutes or so, Abigail's boy would sound the bell for dinner. Jedella did not join the communal table.

"Jedella," I said, "I can't help you. It's too profound a question for me. Can I ask the minister to call on you?"

She said, "Why?"

"He may be able to assist you."

She said, looking at me, her countenance bewildered and yet serene even now, as if *she* had seen that I and all the world were mad – "This is a terrible place. I wish that I could help you, but I don't know how. How can you bear it, Mr Cross, when you witness such suffering?"

I smiled. "I agree, it can be difficult. But then, it could have been worse. We all come to it."

She said, "To what?"

The bell rang. Perhaps it was early, or I had misjudged. I said, "Well, you're very young, Jedella." Some phantom of my father's words, perhaps.

But Jedella went on looking at me with her Lethe eyes. She said, flatly, "What does that mean?"

"Now this is silly. You keep asking me that. I mean that you're young. About 16, maybe."

I confess, I tried to flatter, making her a little less than she appeared to be. One should always be careful with a woman's age, one way or the other. In those days 16 was the dividing line; now it is more 20.

But Jedella, who Luke had thought a ghost, stared into my face. She was not flattered.

She said, "Sixteen years do you mean? Of course not."

"Sixteen, eighteen, whatever it may be."

Outside, my fellow boarders were going down the stairs; they would hear us talking and realize that John Cross had the woman in his room.

Jedella stood up. The last glimmer of light was

behind her, and played about her slender shape, making her seem suddenly thin and despoiled. Abigail must have persuaded her to put up her hair. She was a shadow, and all at once, the shadow of someone else, as if I had seen through her – but to what?

"I am," she said, "sixty-five years of age."

I laughed. But it was a laugh of fright. For I could see her there like a little old lady, five years on from Homer's daughter.

"I'm going down to my meal, Jedella. Are you willing to come?"

"No," she said.

She turned, moved; the new lamplight from beyond the door caught her. She was 18. She went out on to the landing, and away up the house.

What we ate that night I have no notion. Someone – Clark, I think – regaled us with jokes, and everyone guffawed, but for Miss Pim, and Abigail, who did not approve. I chuckled too – but God knows why. Did I even hear what was said?

In the end we remembered, Homer was to go into the ground tomorrow, and a silence fell. I recall how Abigail lighted a candle in the window, a touching gesture, old superstition, but kind and sweet, to guide a soul home.

I had mentioned nothing of what Jedella had said to me, and no one had ventured to ask what she and I had had to converse on.

In my room, I walked about. I lit the lamp and picked up my books, and put them down.

Over in the west end of the house, she was, that girl with dark hair, who had come up from the morning mist, like a ghost.

In God's name, what had she been talking of? What did she suggest? What did she want?

I have said, if I had been a few years younger, I would have thought it a game. And, 40 years older, as now I am, I might have deemed it quite proper, to go across the house and knock on the door. Times change, and customs with them. It was not possible then.

At length I went to bed, and lay in the dark, with all the gentle quiet of that place about me, my haven from the city. But I could not rest. She said she did not know what a funeral was, she inquired how he could bear it, Homer, going into the ground. She told me she was 65 years old.

She was mad. She had come from the river in stained glass shoes, and she was crazy.

I dreamed I was at my father's burial, which once I had been, but no one else was there, save for Jedella. And she looked down into the pit of black earth, and she said to me, "Will you leave him here?"

I woke with tears on my face. I had not wanted to leave him there. Not my father, that lovable and good man, who had given me so much. But surely it had not been my father any more, down there in the dark?

The first light was coming, and I got up and sat by the window. The town was calm and the birds sang. Far off beyond the woods and the forests of pines, I could see, it was so clear, the transparent aurora of the mountains.

I knocked on Jedella's door about 9.30 in the morning, and when she opened it, I said, "Will you walk with me?" I wanted no more clandestine meetings in the rooms.

The funeral was at two. Outside there was nothing out of the ordinary going on. The trees had on their scalding full colour. The stores were open, and a dog or two were nosing down the street. Jedella looked at all this, in a sad, silent way. She reminded me of a widow.

We went into the square, and sat on the vacant bench under the cobweb trees.

"I want you to tell me, Jedella, where you come from. If you will."

She said, "Beyond the woods. Up in the pines. A house there."

"How far away?" I said. I was baffled.

"I don't know. It took me a day to reach this town. A day, and the night before."

"Why did you come here?"

"I didn't know what else to do. I didn't mean to come. I was only walking."

"Why then did you leave the house – the house in the pines?"

"They had all gone," she said. For a moment she looked the way I have only seen human things look after some great disaster, the wreck of a train, the random horror of a war. I did not know it then. What she spoke of was a terror beyond her grasp. It had hurt her, but it had no logic, like the acts of God.

"Who had gone?"

"The people who were there with me. Often they did, of course, but not all at once. The house was empty. I looked."

"Tell me about the house."

Then she smiled. It was the lovely, lilting smile. This memory made her happy.

"It was where I was, always."

"Where you were born?" I asked.

As if from far off, she smiled on at me. "The first thing I remember," she said.

She sat on the bench, and I realized absently that in her old-fashioned dress, she was clad as an old lady, like Homer's daughter or Elsie Baynes, or some other elder woman of our town. The air was sweet and crisp and summer had died. I said, "I'd like to hear."

"It's a big white house," she said, "and there are lots of rooms. I was usually in the upper house, though sometimes I went down. All around was a high wall, but I could see the tops of the trees. There were trees inside the garden too, and I walked there every day, except in winter. Then it was too cold, when the snow was down."

"Who was in the house with you?"

"Many people. Oh, lots of people. Mr Cross. They looked after me."

Curiously I said, as if encouraging a child. "Who did you like the best?"

"I liked them all – but you see, they didn't stay for long. No one ever stayed." She was sad once more, but in a deeper, softer way. She was indeed like a child, that was what I finally saw then, a child in an old lady's dress, which fitted. "When I was a girl," she said, oddly mimicking my thought, "I used to be upset by it, the going away. But in the end, I knew that it had to be."

"Why did it have to be?" I asked, blindly.

"That was their lives. But I remained. That was mine."

"Tell me more about the house," I said.

"Oh, it was only a house. It was where I lived. Some

of the rooms were large, and some, my bedroom, for example, quite small."

"What did you do there?"

"I read the books, and I painted on paper. And I played the piano. There was always something to do."

"Your father and mother," I said.

Jedella glanced at me. "What do you mean?"

The sun was warm on my face and hands, and yet the air was cool. A blue shadow descended from the tower of the church. Something had hold of me now, it held me back. I said, "Well, tell me about something that you enjoyed especially."

She laughed. Her laugh was so pretty, so truthful and young. "There were a great many things. I used to imagine places, places I'd never been – cities of towers from the books I'd read, and rivers and seas. And animals too. There are lions and tigers and bears, aren't there?"

"So I believe."

"Yes, I believe it too. Have you ever seen them?"

"In cages," I said.

She looked startled a moment. But then she brushed that away from her like a fallen leaf. "I longed to see them, and they said, one day."

I said, "Did they tell you when?"

"No. I suppose it was meant to be now. After I left the house."

"Then they told you you must leave?"

"Oh no. But when they were gone, the doors were all open. And the big door in the wall, that too."

I was trying now, quite hard, to follow along with her, not to delay or confuse by protestations. I thought how, when I had spoken of her being born, she had had that look of the polite guest at the party, when you say something he does not understand, but is too nice to debate on.

"The door had never been open before?"

"No, never."

"Did – they – say why not?"

"I never asked, because, you see, it was the way I lived. I didn't need anything else."

She was young – or was she young? – yet surely there had been some yearning, like her wish to see the animals from the books. The young feel they are prisoners even when they are not, or not decidedly. Something came to me. I said, "Did you see pictures in your books of lion cubs?"

"Oh yes," she said.

I said, "And once, you were a child."

"Of course."

Above us the clock struck – it must have done so before. Now it was noon.

Jedella looked about her. She said, "Something's very wrong here. Can't you tell me what it is?"

"It's the way we are, the way *we* live," I said.

She sighed. She said, and there was that in her voice that filled me with a sort of primeval fear, "Is it like this everywhere?"

I said, intuitively, "Yes, Jedella."

Then she said, "Abigail Anchor brought some books up to me. It was a kindness. I didn't understand them."

"In what way?"

"Things happen in those books – that don't happen."

I could have said this might be true of much poor fiction. But clearly she did not imply this.

"You had books in your house," I said. "What about

those books?"

"Parts had been cut away," she said. I said nothing, but as if I had, she added, "I used to ask where those pieces were. But they said the books had been there a long time, that was all."

I said, blindly, as before, "For example, the lion cubs were there, and they grew up into lions. But you didn't know how they had arrived there." She was silent. I said, "And how long did the lions live, Jedella? Did the books say?"

Jedella the ghost, turned her dark eyes on me. She was no longer a temptation, not my muse. She said, "Always, of course. To live – is to live."

"For ever?"

She said and she did nothing. I felt my heart beat in a wild random crescendo, and all at once that peaceful square, that town where I had come to be quiet, was rushing all apart, like a jigsaw, broken. Then it settled. My heart settled.

"Will you come," I said, "to Homer's funeral?"

"If you think so," she said.

I got up and offered her my arm. "We'll take some lunch in Millie's. Then we'll go on."

Her hand was light on me, as a leaf of the fall.

She was quiet and nearly motionless all through the ceremony, and though she looked down at his old, creased, vacant, face, before the coffin was closed, she made no fuss about it.

But when everything was done, and we stood alone on the path, she said, "I used to watch the squirrels playing, in the trees and along the tops of the wall. They were black squirrels. I used to throw them little bits of cake. One day, John Cross, I saw a squirrel lying there on the grass in the garden. It didn't move. It was so still I was able to stroke its side. Then someone came from the house. I think it was a man called Orlen. And he picked up the squirrel. He said to me, 'Poor thing, it's fallen and stunned itself. Sometimes they do. Don't fret, Jedella. I'll take it back to its tree, and it will get better.'"

Over the lawn, Homer's daughter walked, leaning on the arm of her son. She was rubbing at her face angrily muttering about the meat dishes and the sweet pie she had been going to make for the birthday. Her son held his hat across his middle, head bowed, troubled the way

we often are at grief we cannot share.

"So the squirrel was stunned," I said.

"Yes. And later he pointed it out to me, running along the wall."

"That same squirrel."

"He told me that it was."

"And you think now that Homer is only stunned, and we've thrown him down into the ground, and now they'll cover him with earth, so he can't get out."

We stood, two respectful and well-behaved figures. Her life had been an acceptance, and she was coming to accept even now the unacceptable.

"Jedella, will you describe for me very carefully the way you came here, from your house in the pines?"

"If you want."

"It would be a great help," I said. "You see, I mean to go there."

"I can't go back," she said.

I thought she was like Eve, cast out of Eden because she had failed to eat the Forbidden fruit.

"No, I won't make you. But I think I must. There may be some clue to all of this."

She did not argue with me. She had begun to accept also her utter difference, and that she was outnumbered. She guessed something had been done to her, as I did. She had ceased to debate, and would never resist.

When I first took up my life here, I went frequently to walk or ride in the wooded country. Then I got down to my work and adventured less. To ride out on this cold bright morning was no penance, though I had grown a little stiff, and guessed I should feel it later, which I did. The horse was a pretty mare by the name of May.

We went with care along the route Jedella had outlined, even drawing – she had a fair hand with a pencil – landmarks I might look for. Beyond the road we climbed into the woods and so up the hill called Candy Crag, and over into the pines.

I was high up by nightfall, and I could feel the cold blowing down from the distant snow-lined mountains. I thought, as I made my camp, I might hear a wolf call up on the heights, but there was only stillness and the swarm of the stars. Such great calm is in those places and the sense of Infinity. Some men can only live there, but for me, I should be lost. I like the little things. This



was enough, a night or two, a day or two, up so close to the sky. At dawn I went on.

A couple of times I saw my fellow humans. A trapper with his gun, a man far down on the river. Both glimpsed me, and hailed me, and I them. For the rest, the wild things of the woods came and went, a porcupine, a deer, the birds, the insects. May stepped mildly through their landscape, her skin shining like a flame. I spoke to her now and then, and sang her a few songs.

I found the house with no trouble in the afternoon of that second day. Jedella had travelled more quickly than I, unless she had lost track of time.

You could see the mountains from there very well, a vast white battlement rising from the pelt of the pines. But near at hand, the forest was thick, so dense we had to pick our way. The house was in a clearing, as Jedella had told me, shut round with its tall white wall. It had a strange look, as if it had no proper architecture, no style of anywhere at all. Like boxes put together, and roofs put on, and windows set in. Something a child had made, but a child without fantasies.

The gate was open, and the sunlight slanted down through the trees and showed me a man standing there, on the path. He wore a white suit, and was smoking a cigarette. I had become used to the pipes and chewing-tobacco of my town. And somehow I had anticipated – God knows what. He was a very old man, too, but spare and upright, with a mane of thick, whitish hair, and eyebrows dark as bands of iron.

He lifted his hand, as he saw me. And this was not the lonely greeting of the trapper or the river man. I could see, he had expected me, or someone. Had he come there to wait for me?

I am not given to drama, except sometimes when I write, and can have it there on my own terms. But I eased myself off the horse and undid my saddlebag and took out the two brightly-coloured shoes that looked as if they were made of glass, and holding these out, I walked up to him.

"Jedella's slippers," he said. "Did she get so far in them?" "Quite far."

"They're not glass," he said, "something I fashioned, when I was younger. A sort of resin."

"I'd hoped," I said, "you would come and fetch her."

"No, I can't do that. I haven't time now. It had to end, and she has to go on as best she can. She wouldn't know me now, in any case. She saw me for five or six years, when she was a child, and I was in my 20s."

"That would make her old," I said.

"Sixty-five is her age."

"So she said."

"And of course," he said, "it can't be, for she is 18 or 19, a girl."

Behind me, May shook her amber head, as if in warning, and a bird hammered a moment on the trunk of a tree.

"I came here," I said, "hoping to find out."

"Yes, I know it. And I shall tell you. I am Jedediah Goëste, and for now this house is mine. Will you step inside?"

I went with him up the path, leading May, who I settled in a sunny place. The trees were all around inside the wall, the trees where the black squirrels played. I had been struck by his name – Scandinavian, perhaps, and its affinity of sound to what Luke and I had come

to call her: Miss Ghost. *Jedediah*, too, the father's name, and the daughter taking a feminized version, Jedella. Was it so simple? For yes, if he had been in his 20s, he would be near his 90s now, and she would be 65.

Inside the door was an open room, white-walled, quite pleasant, with ornaments and pictures, and with a large fireplace where some logs and cones were burning. Hot coffee stood on a table. Had he known the hour of my coming? No, that was too fanciful. It seemed to me I had better be as careful as I had been when riding through the denseness of the pines. Something strange there was, but not all of it could or need be.

A wide staircase ran up from the room and above was a sort of gallery. I noticed another man standing there, and Jedediah Goëste gestured to him quietly, and the man went away.

"My servant. He won't disturb us."

"Is that Orlen?" I said.

"Oh, no. Orlen is long gone. But Orlen was a favourite of Jedella's, I believe, when she was still a child. It was a pity they all had to leave her. She used to cry in the beginning. She cried when I left her. But later, they told me, she was philosophical. She had grown accustomed."

I had given him in turn my name, and he had taken the privilege of the old to call me at once *John*. We sat down in two large velvet armchairs, and I drank some of the coffee, hot and sweet and good.

"I have come back here," he said, "to die. It's comfortable for me here, and I have all I want. A few months, no more."

I said, "Then shouldn't you have kept her here?"

"She was given, implicitly, the choice. She might have remained, although I didn't think she would. If she had been here when I returned, I would, I think, have had to pretend to be someone else. And even then, the shock –"

"Your age. But it's your death that was the reason for letting her go."

"Yes. I can't anymore manage things, you see. The experiment is over."

"Experiment," I said.

"Come now," he said, "I believe you grasp it, John. I truly believe you do."

"I've read rather widely," I said. "Years ago, I came across the legend of the Buddha." Goëste folded his hands. He smiled his old strong teeth. "Buddha was originally a prince," I said, "and they resolved to keep all ugly things from him – poverty, disease, old age and death. He saw only beauty. Until one day something went wrong, and he found out the truth."

Jedediah Goëste said. "You see, John, I began to think of it even when I was quite young. From the start, everything comes our way. Even when they tell us lies, the facts are still before us. There is a moment when we must work it out. The old lady in the mauve dress with her hands crippled by rheumatics. The dead dog the cart ran over. The bird shot for the table. In Europe in the Middle Ages they fixed a skull over the church door. Under that skull was written, *Remember thou shall be as me.*" He leaned back. His eyes were black, like hers, but, paler with the watery encroachment of old age. "How does the infant learn?" he said. "He copies. The sounds from the mouths that become language. The gestures that become manners. The opinions that he will either adopt or rebel

against. And he learns that the sun rises and sets, and as the days and the years go by, he grows, he changes. All around, the lesson is we grow to our fullness, but after that we decline. From the summit of that hill, the path leads downwards. Down to weakness and sickness, down to the first lines and wrinkles, the stiffening and the lessening. Down to the bowed spine and the loss of teeth and sight and hearing. Down into the grave that awaits us all. *Remember thou shall be as me.* We are taught from the commencement, and reminded over and over."

He pointed at the rug before the fire, where I had laid the glass shoes that were not.

"I made those, to show it could be done. I've done many things like that. I had money, John, and time, and a brain. And, I confess, here and there I have experimented with living things – not to hurt them, never that. But to see. Always, to see."

"Jedella," I said, "was never told about old age, or death. Illness was for some reason mentioned, but as something that no longer existed. Pages were cut from books. The people of the house were always young and fit, and when it became likely they would cease to be, they were sent away. And when a squirrel died under her window, Orlen told her it was stunned, and took it back to its tree, and later he showed her the squirrel running on the wall."

"A girl came to me in the city," said Jedediah Goëste, "it was shocking, I had given her a child. She didn't want it. So she was paid, and I took the child to myself. That was Jedella. She was a baby – younger than Buddha, who I believe was twelve – too young to have learned anything at all. It was so perfect, John, and I had the means. I brought her here, and for those first years I was her friend. And after, of necessity, I had gone, those who came after me carried on my work. They were well-recompensed, and clever. There were no mistakes. She grew up in a world where no one sickened or aged or died. Where *nothing* died, and no death was seen, not even the dead animals for her food. Not even the leaves of the trees."

It was true. She had seen only the pines, renewal but not obvious slough – and then she had come from the open door and down into the woods of fall, where ruby and yellow and wine, the death descends from every tree.

"Now she sees it," I said. "She saw it as sickness to

begin with. Or something that made no sense. But she's turning towards the terrible fact, Mr Goëste, that all things perish."

"Recollect," he said, "that she is 65 years old. She's like a girl. So many lessons, all the same. Can they be unlearned?"

I stood up. I was not angry, I have no word for what I was. But I could no longer sit in the chair before the fire nor drink the fragrant coffee, nor look in that old man's face that was so strong and sure.

"You've acted God, Mr Goëste."

"Have I? How can we presume to know how God has acted, or would act?"

"You think you've made her eternally young. You think you've made her immortal."

"I may have done," he said.

I answered him, "In a world where all things come to an end – what will become of her?"

"You will take care of her now," he said, so easily, so gently. "Your quiet little town. Good people. Kind people."

"But her pain," I said, "her *pain*."

Jedediah Goëste looked at me with her look. He was innocent, in her way. There was no chance against such innocence. "Pain, I think, is after all in the unfathomable jurisdiction of God. I've never been able to

believe that mankind, for all its faults, could devise so horrible and so complex a thing."

"She never questioned?" I asked.

"Questions spring from doubt. Now she questions, I imagine?"

A log cracked in the fire. There was a small ache in my back I would not have had a year ago.

"If you wish, I should be happy for you to be my guest tonight, John."

I thanked him and made some excuse. Even then, even there, the etiquette of my father stayed with me. Those first lessons.

As I reached the door, Jedediah Goëste said one final thing to me: "I'm glad that she found her way to you."

But she had not found her way to me, nor to anyone, how could she? She had not found her way.

The years have passed in the town, and it has been





The MARS CONVENTION

Timons Esaias

Gesta waddled through the lobby of the Charenton Hotel Mars, masking his revulsion as best he could. The whole place had that cheesy charm that humans had so adored. Mindless plants grew in containers here and there. A large excavation filled with water, a “swimming pool,” lapped gently at the edge of the registration slab giving off a faint trace of chlorine. Not enough chlorine to intoxicate, but it did give the air a pleasant tang. Everywhere – on the balconies; in the bar; in the corridors; even, incredibly, in the pool – were Struvei, Buhrmice, and Gleansians costumed as humans. And this Conference claimed to be a scholarly gathering!

The hotel lobby offered a battlefield of warring sensations. The whole infrared glared with excessive energy, lacking any of the clarity he knew on his reasonably sized ice moon circling a proper gas giant. But what could be expected from this crowded, warm, rocky little planet so close to the star? The star the humans had called Sun.

The personal odours would take, in Gesta’s opinion, considerable adaptation. He did not dislike the other spacefaring species; he found them interesting. But it had to be admitted: they smelled funny.

He asked the desk clerk for a more effective atmosphere filter.

In the elevating cubicle, he tried to relax his inner tentacles. Sixty meripips of gravitation bore down on him. Ten times the Miseran normal. He wondered if humans had been so self-deceptive, so fraudulent, because their lives had been so burdensome under the much greater gravitation of their home planet?

Assuming that the seething, molten third planet of this system really was the fabled Earth.

Two fundamentalists, one a Noresht and the other a fellow Miseraph, blocked the corridor to his room.

“Look, the stories in the *Chronicles* don’t even agree with each other!” the Noresht insisted, branches waving wildly and roots taking firm hold of the flooring. “Some of them have to be forgeries. How can the trees grow so easily in ‘The Green Morning’ but the whole planet be as dry and empty as in ‘The Silent Town’ and the ‘Million Year Picnic’? You’ve got to be able to weed out the obviously false texts.”

“If we start throwing out texts in order to reconcile them, how will you stop? How will you know which are sacred and...”

Sensing him, they fell silent. The Imperium’s representative, with the power to ban their publications, shouldn’t hear them bickering.

Not that it mattered, because Gesta’s speech to the Convention, and his report for the Imperium, were both nearly complete. Nothing these foolish humanophiles would decide had any bearing on his decision. This nonsense must be brought to a close, before it poisoned all of history.

The suite seemed narrow, probably meant for Mino-sodni with their practically two-dimensional bodies. The trailing edges of his wings kept dragging on the walls. Even first-class resorts like this found it difficult to accommodate all nine spacefaring species. Laying topsoil on the floor for Noreshtae, then replacing it with ice for the Schra’a’lengi, and swapping atmospheres from

oxygen to chlorine to fluorine must cost a fortune.

Gesta scanned the conference program. Just as he expected – one misguided attempt at scholarly rationalization after another. “Lensmen, Stranger, Ylla or Cacciaguida: Are all Martians from the same Mars?”; “Deriving the Geography of Narnia, Avalon, and the Grey Havens”; “Evidence for Identifying Mahasamatman as a Scion of Count Dracula of Transylvania”; “Probable Talfamadorian Intervention in Orr’s Voluntary Therapeutic Treatment and the Grasshopper Lies Heavy Oracle”; and these so-called studies were supposed to produce a definitive agreement on the history of the human race, by reconciling the apparent differences among the various sacred texts of science fiction.

No two scholars here, of the 2,000 invitees to this half-marsyear conference, agreed on any interpretation of the canon. But they expected to send a signed and sealed conventicle, the Mars Convention, to the Imperium. It was, to use a humanism, hogwash!

There’d been 50 days of preliminary lectures before Gesta’s arrival, and he spent the afternoon oozing off landing-lag and running through the summaries. So much effort, so little truth.

Not that Human Studies had much to work with, to be sure. The hard evidence was limited to a few bits of meteor-pelted metal on the surface of this planet, four moons of the sixth planet, and the tenth planet; some “satellites” wandering in cometary orbits; and the remains of two human habitats. In both habitats were found the artefacts that had caught the attention of starfaring culture: books. Thin rectangles with symbols embedded on flexible ceramic leaves. About a hundred codices depending on how you counted them. Several repeats. Almost all bearing the phrase “science fiction” on the cover, along with impressive portraits of this remarkably active and muscular race.

Most of the other artefacts had decayed beyond study. Only the books, some posters and one phonograph record were intelligible.

The search for the humans had been going full-tilt ever since.

Gesta woke from a “dreamless sleep.” As the preening acid warmed in the toilet cubicle, he wondered for the thousandth time just what the humans had meant by “dreaming.” Only three of the nine spacefaring species slept, and they had no experience of these strange events that troubled sleeping humans, and which seemed outside time. If only the work on the subject by human Freud had survived.

Reclining in the public eating rooms, he surveyed the cliques grouped here and there. In the far corner huddled the four fictomathematicians who’d been invited to speak. Two Talfkapalites, one Miseraph, and a Gleans, probably representing the four differing schools of fictomathematic interpretation. Most of their work centred on the two apparently mathematical texts: human Lorentz’s *Human Michelson’s Interference Experiment* and human Einstein’s *The Foundation of the General Theory of Relativity*. Texts which revealed, according to your preference: that human physics was amusingly flawed; or deeply perceptive in some yet-unknown way; or a symbol system having little to do with physics; or magical formulae.

Gesta himself had no opinion. His report would leave fictomathematics out.

The hotel food was palatable, but lacking in brutality. His attention wandered until Sharia came sliding down an aisle, straight to Gesta’s couch. “Miseraph Gesta of the Imperium! I heard you’d joined us.” Sharia made all the right mudras, with only a couple of pseudohuman touches thrown in.

Gesta reluctantly greeted his major philosophical opponent. This whole Conference had sprung from the proposals of schra’a’leng Sharia, who admittedly had a gift for squeezing funds out of cold gases for scholarly studies. Sharia coiled her long, flexible body around a support post. Gesta never trusted Schra’a’lengi, or their scholarship. A body that can twist in every direction, in his opinion, produced arguments that did the same.

Sharia made a conspiratorial gesture. “Come to tell us we’re all idiots, I presume?”

Gesta had not expected such bluntness. “I have come to see if there has been any critical progress on the canon of science fiction.”

“The *sacred* canon of science fiction,” corrected Sharia. “It’s been fairly bleak, so far. Last week’s highlight was esprow Kervantz arguing ‘that old head-to-toe scarred Ahab was really Frankenstein’s Monster, offended at the white whale for belittling his non-god-made existence’ or something. I was appalled at the inventiveness of it.”

Sharia uncoiled and began to slither off, but said in parting, “I’ve arranged to give you the last word. Your speech is the day before the negotiating begins on the Convention.”

My report to the Imperium will be the last word, Gesta thought. But the encounter puzzled him. Did Sharia not respect the Reconciliation movement, either? How hypocritical was she?

He attended the lecture “Were Bodices Ever Intact?: Human Clothing in Prose and Illustration.” The galleries were packed with humanophiles interested in “costuming.” “Philes” abounded at the Conference, maybe three times the number of the scholars. Parts of Gesta liquefied at the cost of moving all these folks across parsecs of space for this absurd exercise in...

He hesitated to express the pointlessness of it all, even to himself. But that was what he’d come for. To declare science fiction utterly, dangerously, and even criminally pointless.

Scanning the gallery, he noted the rich solecisms of attire. Chain mail and ray guns. High Transylvanian capes and deerstalker caps. Hobbit jerkins and red eye caps. The worst was a Struvei in a swallowtail tuxedo, steel-plated bra, spurred boots, and a broadsword dangling unsheathed from a hide belt.

He left.

Despite his antipathy to the Conference, Gesta enjoyed the experience of total immersion in the various Human Studies. He knew their books to be misleading and unsound, but that didn’t obliterate the questions their study raised. What had happened to them? Was this really their home system? How did the third planet turn into a molten ball, this late in the system’s age, and without completely slagging its moon? What did all these

books really mean? And most of all, what had made humans “tick” as they once said? What had they wanted?

The philes, of course, seemed entranced by these questions, but not to the point of trying to solve them. The “human experience” interested them more – and they pursued it through costumes, public book readings, art shows, surgical alterations, and the endless playing of the Glass Bead Game.

Gesta was highly suspicious of the clearly dangerous tendencies of the Glass Bead Game. Many a fine mind had been distracted by it, and many a career sidetracked into its all-encompassing complications. Glass Bead Game players and fans lived in self-created worlds of their own, which they claimed had significant connections to the mundane world, but which Gesta found dangerously simplistic or sometimes wholly false.

Even the rules were not as human Hesse had portrayed them. The current rage was collectable playing tiles, which had no textual basis at all. But the artefact arcades were filled with tile vendors.

The annual Imperiate Festival Game had been shifted here to Mars in honour of the Conference; and half the philes were playing in it – and most of the scholars. Those who weren’t probably wished they were.

The theme for this game, appropriately, was the question of Human Destiny. *Humans had many gifts unknown to us, and powers we yet do not understand, claimed the Festival Game Audience Guide. They could be invisible, travel in time, and communicate instantly across vast stretches of the galaxy. They could exceed the speed of light without swapping mass from the destination point. They could create matter ex nihilo, and read minds. They could murder without regret, steal without embarrassment, and by the simple mention of a small city’s name could recast events.*

“Antwerp,” Gesta muttered, but the universe did not change.

Some even attained immortality by birth, blood consumption or medical wisdom. Humans, with few exceptions, were strong, wise, and unusually lucky. Their sexual attractiveness is the envy of the galaxy.

What fate, what destiny, awaited such a race? This year’s game will follow this question, moving from the tenets of physics and the list of human virtues, and exploring the many ends to which they may have come. The Game Question is: “Where Are They Right Now, and What Are They Doing?”

“Honourable Councillor,” said gleans JoNikt, with that disrespectful edge that long association permitted him to use, “what’s a miserable Miseraph like you doing, shaking your head at our Game?” Gesta had been listening to a pointless debate between two players, one insisting that *Leibowitz* held moral priority over all other revelations, the other holding out for *Star Maker*. “Really, you should come down off your professional throne and give it a try.”

“I have seen too many promising careers lost when your Game sucked...”

The Gleans straightened his Player’s robe with a carelessly extended talon. “True, Councillor, anything as fascinating as this can tempt one into over-indulgence, and over-indulgence in anything, your own taste for efflorescent fluorine for example, is dangerous. But

it’s the most challenging intellectual exercise I know.”

“It’s more an addiction than an exercise.”

“The Glass Bead Game is nothing but the association of ideas, presented as a dramatic metaphor. It tempts the players to think, to think in original ways and in new patterns. I would assume you’d find that admirable!”

“I would if I believed in these... stories.”

“Perhaps, dear Gesta, if you were to put your disbelief into suspension...?”

“Suspension!? Disbelief is the cornerstone of Science. To give it up is to choose insanity!” Gesta heard his voice squeak embarrassingly with emotion.

Gleans JoNikt’s skull ring incandesced with amusement and affection. “You have always been an intolerable old grump, miseraph Gesta.”

“And you have always been... how did the humans say it?... a cheeky scoundrel.”

Gesta’s own great-great-ancestor, enthralled with the human canon, had led an expedition to search through six other stellar systems hoping to find the real Earth, and there to excavate the ruins of Dotheboys Hall (her dream being to stand where human John Browdie had stood, at the final breaking up of that place; the greatest emblematic moment in human history, in her opinion, and the opinion of many others), before sadly concluding that this was, indeed, the Solar System – and the molten planet, Earth.

It had broken the honourable ancestor’s spirit. Nothing would console her. Her mate had clung to the belief that the humans had gone into another dimension, that they were all there, all still living, retelling the old tales of human heroism. But he could not convince her; she would have none of it.

Three bodies, with just one brain between them, Gesta thought. An Esprow whose name-tags said “Rewawk.” Its thinking body had just asked his opinion of the human homeland. The eating body was working its way down the buffet table, a large platter in each claw. The reproductive body lounged against the bandstand, assessing the possibilities.

Gesta turned the question back to Rewawk, knowing the Esprow was more interested in spouting his own opinion than in listening to another’s. Esprows experienced too much dialecticism in their own triune lives. In other things they wanted clear certainties. “I think they’ve retreated,” Rewawk propounded. “I’m convinced they’re living in the centre of Earth, possibly waiting for beings as adventurous as themselves to come find them. We must demand funding to create a probe that will go down through all that molten stone and find them. I call it the *Nautilus* Program, after...”

“Yes, of course.” Why did the nitwits always admire Nemo so much? On his cynical days, Gesta felt that their real interest in humans was the human admiration for mass killers who had found a plausible excuse. On those days Gesta was sure what the meaning of the molten third planet had to be. Very sure.

He discussed encountering the esprow Rewawk over late dinner with gleans JoNikt and two other colleagues from the Imperial War College. “Interesting. I heard

from Holubo that this same Rewawk was touting the theory this morning that they had all been sucked into a black hole of their own devising. And that only the day before he had insisted with equal vigour that the humans were now disembodied spirits watching over us and keeping us from harm."

"He's been using his feeding brain too much, I fear," snorted Gesta.

"At least he is willing to consider more than one point of view," snipped JoNikt, as though he thought that was a virtue.

The two colleagues, both Mino-sodni, hastened to redirect the conversation. "We've just come from the *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub: History or Forgery* panel," said the higher ranked of the two. "Most interesting," observed his junior.

"So which did they decide?"

"Pardon, Councillor?"

Gesta flipped his disembowelling scoop from side to side to indicate the choices. "History? Forgery?"

"Oh, they veered off the topic almost immediately," the lesser one explained. "We got onto the Game question. The panellists seem to think that humans are extinct."

"And what," asked JoNikt, over a beaker of smoking blood, "do you believe?"

The junior officer gathered his thoughts as though for an exam question. "I persist in believing that humans discovered, or were given, faster-than-light drive. Seeking the Grey Havens, or Arrakis, or perhaps pursuing the Dragon's Egg, they left."

The senior Mino-sodni interrupted. "I think F-T-L should be seen as an emblem of the spacelessness of human consciousness..."

"Excuse me, sir," Gesta impatiently quashed the officer's philosophical speculation. "But your colleague used an interesting expression. 'Persist' you said 'in believing.' Why, if I may ask, do you 'persist'?"

"Because," the officer admitted with foodbeingish candour, "if I believe it, I can still seek them. If I do not believe, I must give up the adventure. I must abandon all hope."

In summary, the very concept of Reconciliation of the so-called "sacred" texts of science fiction is based on a false premise. The books in our possession are not a seamless garment fabricated by a single garmentshrubbery, and scholars could spend in finite amounts of energy, money, and mutual vituperation without ever coming to an honest consensus on how the books fit together into a whole, Gesta dictated to his textwriter. The texts of science fiction are each individual. They do not form a whole, nor are they the same things. Human Darwin's purposes in composing science fiction, if it is that, are undoubtedly quite different from human Clarke's. Trying to make them one thing is inherently self-defeating.

But this is not the most dangerous false premise. The idea that these works present an accurate portrayal of human affairs and human history... A gentle knock at the door interrupted. How quaintly human, he thought. The inspection scope revealed Sharia and three other members of the Steering Committee furling and unfurling their appendages in the corridor.

"I can't invite you in," he said. "There's no room in here."

"Could we meet in the executive ice tubs, then?" asked

Jivannee. Gesta considered this blithering Struvei to be the worst form of bureaucratic cretin. Gesta had read his papers. Sub-idiotic. Deca-moronic. "In half an hour?"

Even Sharia seemed honestly solicitous. "We would like to discuss the Convention, if you don't mind. Your attitude is key."

At least they had that right, Gesta thought.

Fools. Self-deluded fools.

Gesta luxuriated in his pool of liquid chloromethane. If they were trying to soften him up, meeting in the ice tubs was good strategy. Sharia lay coiled on a sheet of water ice. The others had cool metallic crystals of their own preference. Billed to their Universities, he assumed.

Sharia cut quickly to the gonads of the issue. "We would like you to tell us the gist of your presentation, so that we can try to persuade you to drop your opposition to the Mars Convention, or at least to the idea. You do intend to oppose it, I assume?"

"I intend to take my cue from a passage in human Melville," he said. "In chapter nine, where it adjures us 'To preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood'. That is what I intend to do."

Jivannee made a tolerant mudra. "And what Truth do you wish to preach," he asked, "in the face of which Falsehood?"

Gesta knew these four had their whole lives' work invested in Human Studies, and as silly as much of their product was, it didn't please him to puncture their air-sacs. But he would be making the same points in just a few days, and then again before the Imperium, and probably over and over for the rest of his cycles.

He simply summarized. "I think that no archaeological remains have been found of Trantor, or the Empire, not because they are in another galaxy, or time, or dimension; but because there never was an Empire. Or a Culture. I don't think humans could find new realms on the other side of mirrors, or chifforobes, or windmills or in computer networks. I do not think any of their gods ever existed. I don't think the Earth is molten because another planet collided with it. I do not think human King Arthur will come again."

"My premise is that science fiction is not 'fiction' in the first sense, as the Galactic Human Dictionary has it: 'An archetypical historic event, written down to preserve the glory of said event for future generations.' I think scholars have wilfully misled themselves since the books were first discovered. The second sense, 'A similar story, possibly false,' covers this case. I actually think the whole first definition is wishful thinking. I think the only definition of 'fiction' is 'falsehood'."

He expected anger from them. There was none. Sharia flashed the mudra of complete concurrence. "Just so," she said. "Of course. Well put."

"Quite," agreed Jivannee. "Quite," repeated the others.

Gesta, taken aback by the sudden capitulation, hesitated to continue. What depth of hypocrisy was here? What trap? "And so I think the Convention can serve no purpose. It should be rejected, in any form."

Riosto, a Noresht, slowly flowered in its tub of crystals and asked, "Do you think Human Studies should be abandoned, Councillor?"

"Not entirely. But the texts should be de-sacralized. And the search for humans abandoned, of course."

"Why?"

"Because they are all dead."

Riosto went briefly to seed. "Do you find no value in these texts, beyond their existence as artefacts, Councillor?"

Gesta could not frame a reply, at first, and Sharia spoke. "Look at the stories these humans told themselves, Councillor. We tell stories of slow steady growth, calm maturation, sensible decline. All our stories come to nothing in the end, because we know that we all come to nothing in the end. But humans, these long-dead humans, told stories of a different sort. Most of their stories had happy endings. Their stories are full of choices, conflicts, and individuals making a difference in their own worlds; not in endless generations, but in a single lifetime, or a day, an hour, sometimes an instant." Sharia uncoiled for emphasis. "In their stories love sometimes triumphs over hate."

"But it's made up," Gesta protested. "It's all made up!"

Sharia, forming the mudra of ambiguity, replied, "Councillor, everything is made up, both the false and the true. Every significant part of the nine cultures has been 'made up'."

She coiled again. "I will tell you what we think. We think that the humans created these works in order to amuse themselves, clearly; to deceive themselves, possibly; and to think ahead. This was their most important characteristic, an urge to imagine what was not, what might yet be. They met adversity with creativity. The relics of no dead species have caught our imaginations like these humans and their science fiction, because imagination is their hallmark. I would hate to be the one to condemn such a body of work, merely because it was not factual."

"But they failed," Gesta insisted, quietly. "Their imagination must have been a gripless blade. Look at their home."

"Indeed they did fail," noresht Riosto agreed, dropping early fruit. "Indeed, they came to nothing, as in our stories. No happy ending. Failed as we will fail, leaving a few broken tools and their works of the imagination."

"And all that makes thinking beings different from food-beings," hissed Sharia, "is the works of the imagination."

Gesta found this assertion confusing, but challenging. "What," he finally asked, "do you want of me?"

"We want you to give your lecture, taking an entire day if need be. We want you to call gods suspect, the Glass Bead Game unhistorical, and the sacred texts of science fiction to be so much space opera. But then you should be perfectly honest with yourself and your audience. This is great stuff. It has already changed the way we imagine ourselves. Why not admit it?"

Gesta felt physically soothed by the bath, but mentally agitated by the blatant attempt to get him to abandon his principles. He waddled through the main lounge, now filled with flirting conventioners, and past the Space Beagle Bar & Zanzibar Ice-Cream Stand. The only talk scheduled for this late hour was something billed as "The Three Laws in Our Time" that sounded revoltingly moralistic. He chose, instead, to explore the Artefact Arcade.

Artefact Arcades, a universal fixture wherever philes gathered, had neither human artefacts nor arched roofs, but they were legitimately interesting anyway. Hundreds of different editions, in all the known scripts,

of the canonical texts; thousands of dramatic renditions in all the standard viewing formats; and tens of thousands of trinkets filled the tables and stalls.

Things, he thought, objects had such significance for them. The instruments and regalia of power were clearly the dynamic centre of most of their books. It was reflected here in the swords, the magic wands, the armour, the uniforms, the models and pictures of warships, the cards and yarrow stalks for foretelling the future, the time-machines for exploring the past, the garments that gave their women such overwhelming magnetism, and above all by the guns. Many of the objects were quite beautiful, but power was their essence.

Our material world was bland before we discovered theirs, he admitted.

In the Great Gallery of the arcade hung a pair of magnificent chitonotapestries, huge things that almost filled the largest wall. They weren't even for sale, the works of gleams Emekel were all commissioned and rarely changed hands. These were being shown off to the public before disappearing into a private collection, never to be seen again.

They embodied everything wrong with the Reconciliation movement. The artist had tried to unite all the varying stories of the human canon into one, both allegorically and historically. The two panels formed a single work, dominated by huge disks of planets hanging like enormous blue aspirin tablets at each end. The Earth of *When Worlds Collide* hung at the right end, and Bellus hung at the left. Also on the left panel was Troy, with human Priam's hundred sons manning the ramparts. They looked down on one of the Martian projectiles opening up. Elsewhere the tripods were already deployed and moving in the direction of the right panel.

Just above the disk of Earth on the right were the Achaeans, and if one looked carefully you could see human Homer down by the beach, cataloguing the ships. News of the Martian invasion spread across this panel, men sweating over hot wireless sets trying to get the message out. Also on this panel were primitive humans, trying to discover fire by striking the first match against the sandpaper side of the matchbox, while others discovered agriculture (as shown by their squeezing what might have been castor oil from some round green seeds.) On the left panel were dinosaurs and dragons and jealous gods just waiting to take these benefits away.

The tapestries were beautifully embellished with a double-helix motif, with different gems indicating the four bases that formed the structural pairs. Informed opinion held that life was impossible with less than six bases, *pace* human Watson. Had the error originated with Holmes? Gesta wondered, then caught himself.

From the ray-gun in human Hector's hand it seemed that Emekel accepted the theory that *Iliad*, *When Worlds Collide* and *War of the Worlds* recorded the same events, and appear different only due to sloppy interpretation.

Hundreds of different stories, intricately interlaced, filled the space of the two panels. Gesta noted that they did effectively portray the most chilling thing about humans, the thing that tied so many of their stories together. They were generally about winning. About two forces in conflict and one annihilating the other.

All his life he had been disturbed by this recurrent theme. It made for great drama, for gripping narration;

but Gesta could not bring himself to admire annihilation.

Standing further back, he spent some minutes taking the work in, knowing that he stood before one of the most beautiful creations of civilization. Why doesn't our history inspire such creativity? he wondered. Why did we need the human lies?

He asked a docent what the work was entitled.

The Atrocity Exhibition.

Near the climax of his address, Gesta was concluding a long list of absurd events in the sacred canon. "All of this is untrue. And I will say so in my report to the Imperium.

"Likewise, I will report that it is foolishness to spend official funds on questions like the probable anatomy of the upright tom cat in human Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, or whether there were ever potatoes of prey."

The audience had quieted from polite silence to the stillness of a deep subterranean burial chamber. He raised his eyes from the illuminated screen of his textwriter, and surveyed the audience. They had packed the auditorium to hear his remarks, knowing that he had the power not only to eliminate research funding but even to ban their meetings if he so decided.

It occurred to Gesta that this was a profoundly human moment. He held the power to annihilate this misguided nonsense, and the time had come to use it.

The pause grew longer. Sounds of polite retching began here and there. A few small children had to be stifled.

His tentacle tapped gently on the podium, and then, almost by itself, slid the MODE toggle from DISPLAY to RECORD.

"But..." Gesta heard himself begin, "while I don't think we should believe in orcs, it doesn't hurt to keep an eye out for them." There were chortles of disbelief from the hall. "Nor does it hurt to know, in advance, which side we intend to take should the Dark Lord, or Big Brother, or the Mule ever re-appear. "Works of the imagination allow us to consider such things, and it would be... it would be dishonest to pretend that this has no value. Works of the imagination touch our internal organs, without dangerous surgery; and often do more effective work there than our best physicians.

"I will tell the Imperium that believing these works to be the truth is pernicious. But I will also say that the time spent reading these works is not wasted, far from it.

"I will tell them that books were the greatest instrument of power in the human arsenal, imbued with more meaning than any other of their artefacts. I will tell them that these works were the best gift humanity could have left for us, and should be widely read, greatly enjoyed and lovingly preserved."

He firmly moved the MODE toggle to OFF. Moments later there wasn't a hooked bodice in the house.

Timons Esaias has appeared in *Interzone* twice before, with the very popular "Norbert and the System" (issue 73) and the timely political satire "A Changing of the Guard" (issue 87). Other stories, poems and humorous articles have appeared in sundry small magazines and anthologies around the world. He lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

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 Eastern Arts
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In the Name of Allah the Omnipotent?

John Whitbourn

*"I saw the vulture face of Beria,
Half hidden by a muffler,
Glued to the window of his limousine
As he drove slowly by the kerb hunting down
a woman for the night."*

Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Soviet poet

She was in lustrous fur, against the Russian autumn and against the old ways. The girl carried six months' workingmen's wages on her swaying back. Its thick silver armoured her. She didn't see the old *babushkas* selling their last possessions on the street, the state workers all threadbare and stoic. They were invisible. All sunglasses and bare legs, she was a different breed altogether. No trolleybus or metro for Moscow's new rich, oh no. A black foreign car would be waiting to pick her up.

Muadh ben Moussa saw her every day. He tried to avert his eyes but it was very hard. Satan sprinkled allure over his chosen *houris*. Even the pious on their death-beds could be distracted by the gleam of flesh. And Moussa was weak – and tired: his day was already old when this Mafia moll quit one bed to go to another. He asked the Almighty for control over his eyes and the feet that always seemed to bring him to this window at this time. God blessed him with the strength to scamper away down the long corridor.

It was puzzling. There were parts of the Embassy that made him prone to lustful thoughts: not just the typists' pool but also empty rooms and ordinary windows. Perhaps, *Jinn* lived in them, ebbing out wickedness over the decades till it oozed from the very bricks and mortar. In future, he resolved to avoid them as best he could. It would be difficult but he would try. Ben Moussa knew he could not confide his fears to the other Embassy staff: he was already the butt of laughter for his old-fashionedness. They rarely prayed or kept a fast. Only old women and *fundamentalists* were observant, they told him: which was he?

Moussa never answered: he was not clever enough, not like the smart boys and girls who did

the real work here and who would go on to great things. Ben Moussa made the tea and filed letters and was grateful for the glamorous job luck had gained him. Five times a day he thanked both the Almighty and Madame Afra Salimah for all his good fortune. The Ambassador's wife had taken pity on him and his dying shop in Tunis. Her kind eyes saw he was marching fast into poverty: a clumsy dreamer at life's mercy. She rarely prayed either but ben Moussa was determined she should pass the gates of Paradise. He prayed her prayers for her, an extra 15 minutes each time he could.

One thing he did know was that he must not be a *fundamentalist*. They belonged in Algeria and Libya, Tunisia's unhappy neighbours. They were a threat to... well, everything apparently. They carried bombs and did not have the love of Allah before their eyes. The Government imprisoned them and worse. No one really suspected poor ben Moussa, for all that they teased him, but he kept his attempts at holiness to himself. He prayed in cellars and cupboards.

Like this one, for instance – or rather he used to pray here – for this was another place of bad feelings. Yet another evil *Jinn* probably. Its temper fits explained the wounds on the walls most likely: great rough gouges at regular intervals all around. The others joked that there had been chains, proper slave-manacles, embedded there when the Tunisians moved in. Naturally, being a civilized people, they had ripped them straight out. Ben Moussa didn't know which version he preferred to believe: neither gave birth to happy thoughts. He just wished his packets of tea and coffee could be kept elsewhere but when he had asked he had not been understood. He hadn't the right words, and the girls in the encrypting room had giggled at him. They only stopped, ashamed, on seeing the tears well up in his eyes.

He would not ask again but would be *strong*. His father, peace be upon him, had always urged him to be that – and then would sigh.

There was a reception this afternoon; representa-

tives from the Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and Turkmenistan embassies were calling. Newly liberated and all Moslems together, the Central Asians would be celebratory and open-hearted, amenable to influence away from the *fundamentalists*. Nothing must go wrong, that had been impressed upon him. His role was to ensure that the coffee was perfect and free-flowing, proper Arab style. If a cup lingered empty or grew too full of dregs the Ambassador would frown at him, and that made ben Moussa cringe.

Then the Devil sent him a thought of the Russian *houri*, just when he was counting his coffee pots. He fought it and so she became Madame Afra Salimah, only younger and naked and disporting herself, inviting him between spread legs. Worst of all was his urge to surrender. It was almost stronger than him. Ben Moussa screwed up his eyes, cursing the disloyal vision. This was not him: he was a romantic; he wished to go home one day and marry a village girl and be kind to her. What would she, the girl he didn't yet know, think on learning he carried such thoughts secret in his head? These torments had not troubled him before: it was a new problem, sent by Allah in His all-wisdom to test him.

"O Allah, I seek protection in You from filth and impurity!" He slapped down his improper arousal, glad and deserving of the pain. "I seek refuge in Allah against the accursed Satan!"

For a second more it continued, as another presence in the room thrashed around, striking terror from the walls. It was angry. Ben Moussa gathered up his supplies and fled, not shutting the door. The room's mixed scent of fear and lust pursued him – but he now knew it was not his alone.

"Tea!"

The *Russ* Mafia and "businessmen" in the queue for holiday visas smirked at ben Moussa. These new-style rich *Franks* didn't like being kept waiting by brown-skinned races. They welcomed his scurrying arrival with the tray of cups. It re-established the proper order of things.

"My guts think my throat's been slit," said the visa clerk, mock-stern and snatching the drink without thanks. "I called ages ago. Where have you been, ben Moussa? Playing with yourself?"

He wished they would not talk like that, not in front of women, not in front of all the *Ivans* and *Tanyas*. It made him blush.

"You are a very rude man, Aziz Mohammed." He spoke softly from under averted eyes. "I do my best."

That only made them roar with laughter: a sheep had growled at them.

"The tea, I grant you," chuckled the smooth youth, "isn't bad – usually. As to your other habits I can't say. Off you go, father, go and practise whatever it is you do when people aren't watching you."

He left them the tray, unable to face their company any more. It put acid in his stomach, tormenting a digestion already ruined by Russia's rations. The tea-things could be fetched later when they'd all finished for the morning. He could have rare confidence that nothing would be returned to his kitchen. No one lifted a hand to shorten his long days.

Escape lay through the *Ivans*: all a head taller than him, even the women. They were not the few, grey, bad-suited ones of years ago: the only old-style Russians who came in now were those who shyly asked for food. Ben Moussa pitied those, both for their plight and their disbelief when he gave to them from his own rations. This lot, by contrast, had nothing to ask of him. They were the scum risen to the top of a new-poured bath: *disc-jockeys* and *directors* and their bedfellows, male and female, desirous of spending big money in the warm. Ben Moussa's country would do: it had no *fundamentalists*. They looked down on him as he threaded a way through.

Though he tried not to see, he was still a man. If his downcast eyes encountered beauty it was a struggle not to raise them. He was used to the *Tanyas'* lack of modesty – and even sympathized, knowing harsh necessity drove them to spray-on clothes and skirts like belts – but this one drew a gasp. Her legs went on forever: no dress arrived. She was naked!

Ben Moussa's hand flew to his face. He had *looked* – more than he ought – and asked forgiveness for it. He expected uproar and for the problem to be dragged from his hands – but nothing came. Even in these degraded days surely nudity aroused some response, some shame? Could no one else but him see her?

His question to himself, suddenly understood, froze him. Allah's animating breath faltered. Ben Moussa spread his concealing fingers.

She was still there. No one else could see her. She was naked, and all... disappointment.

The young girl looked at ben Moussa, her long yellow hair following her head with bewitching pause. She could see him. He howled distress. The *Ivans* stared.

She was beauty itself but he ignored it through compassion. It had bought her no joy. For a moment she had beseeched him – but it was fleeting. She did not hate ben Moussa but she was disappointed – with him or life or the return on beauty, he could not tell.

Pity replaced fear and ben Moussa made it welcome: the one came from God, the other was man's creation. He gathered strength to speak.

She would not have it and walked away. Her stride was firm, resolved, but not of her own choice. She walked under compulsion.

Ben Moussa watched and understood. The girl was headed for the cellar, the worst of cellars. The locked door did not delay her. He wanted to help but *there* he would not follow, not even if Allah himself commanded.

"... one night at Kuntsevo, when Stalin and Beria were very drunk, particularly Beria, he suddenly turned to Stalin and said in Georgian: 'You know, Master,' – he never called him Comrade Stalin, always 'Master' – 'You know, Master, there is only one thing wrong with the Soviet Union?' And when Stalin asked what that was, Beria replied: 'That a man like me can reach the position I have!'"

"Stalin laughed all night – he thought it a tremendous joke."

– *The Beria Papers*, Alan Williams

It took two days but in the end ben Moussa obeyed his Lord. Allah commanded kindness and the poor girl, even though beyond the veil of this earthly life, required his help. He could not withhold it and remain Muadh ben Moussa. The village girl awaiting him, all unknowing, in Tunisia would expect it – otherwise he would not be worthy of her love.

He prayed for restored control over his insides, and divine scaffolding for his courage. Then he descended to the cellar.

Even the clever boys and girls in the Embassy half-joked that it was haunted. Ben Moussa noticed they never went down there themselves, instead commanding some *Ivan* lackey or himself to go on rare errands for an old file. There were festering piles of them dumped there: closed cases and abandoned projects from Allah knew when, damp hillocks illuminated by naked bulbs. Early on in his Moscow days ben Moussa had thought his prayers would protect him and ventured those stairs without doubt. He had planned to put some order in the “archive,” boxing the stuff up in case it should ever be needed again. Occasionally word did come from Tunis, saying a Soviet was of interest and asking what did he write on his visa application? Ben Moussa wanted to discourage people just chucking files down there from the top of stairs. It was a bind having to mine through a random avalanche of paper.

Once *down there*, he'd had more sympathy with their laziness. The place ate away at you; it was an icy abode of *Shaitan*. Ben Moussa did not think it was just the Russian winter that made it its home. His thoughts were never more indecent, never less sure of Allah's essential benevolence, than *down there*. He always took a bath, work permitting, as soon as he emerged. Yet for hours or days some taint still clung on, lowering his spirit. It could not be lingering invisible cobwebs for he'd noticed that even spiders shunned the place. Ben Moussa worried that part of the cellar came back up the stairs with him.

Now he would return it, shedding the stain along with the sin of cowardice. Ben Moussa had thought to pass through life without entering battle but Allah had decreed otherwise. He would therefore play his part like a man.

The lights worked, a sickly glow reaching the furthest corners of the void. His earlier efforts, the narrow green boxes, were stacked man-high into shapes, like house walls or barricades, harbouring rock-pools of shadow. Against them washed foothills of unsorted files, pale hummocks of paper, poultices absorbing the damp of the floor.

Ben Moussa cursed and admonished the bad that was there and sang sweet words to whatever it imprisoned.

“O Allah, I seek refuge in You from male and female devils. Do not despair, this is a cleansing from sins, if Allah wills.”

The boards creaked under his careful tread. He recognized each wooden protest. Few ventured here but him, and this was his signature. Whatever lived here would recognize this song of the stairs and know it was ben Moussa.

“Allah suffices us and He is the best Guardian.”

He reached the bottom. Cold communicated itself through the thin soles of his shoes. That chill was constant, year-long.

The cellar was rank with decay, from icy floor to grimy roof vault. All the paper abandoned there, once briefly important, now less than nothing, offered up the scent of its pulpy origins into the air. It was not hard to visualize fallen trees, dismembered on the forest floor.

“Miss? I am here. Please show yourself.”

She did not. He pondered the torment that must be her flesh in this eternal winter. She must have become a creature of ice.

“Miss? It is I, ben Moussa. You sought my aid. I am here.”

There was no sign: no peak or trough in the place's malignity.

“Move on. Seek the light of Allah that calls you. Do not linger in this terror...”

Ben Moussa could not be sure. His hearing was not so good: his father had loved to box him round the ears till they rang. Yet was that an intake of breath, hope given voice – or a snarl?

It came from the direction of the highest piled boxes. He remembered standing on tip-toe to stack them.

“Move on. The afflicted, the crushed, have nothing to fear from Allah...”

That came from the heart: as a child he'd lulled himself to sleep with it. School for a skinny, tearful, poor boy had been a trial.

Again that sound. Ben Moussa felt surer of its source. “I am here. I mean you well.”

He surprised himself. Unhesitating steps took him to a three-sided redoubt of boxes. He laid hands on the nearest stack. “I am not afraid. You will be rescued. I will tell you the truth to your face.”

She had been a *Russ*, a *Frank*, he felt sure: the blue eyes and straw hair proclaimed it. In life she had most likely never heard the facts of Allah and his benevolence. That lack – and some tragedy – had trapped her in the merely material world. She simply didn't know there was a better place awaiting her. He could tell her.

Ben Moussa lost patience. He struck the remaining clammy boxes away with his arm. A window was cleared.

She was not there – though her sob was. Ben Moussa heard it distinctly, coming from the damp, empty air. He had not expected this. How could one comfort the invisible? The enclosed dark space held nothing but her unhappiness.

Ben Moussa swallowed hard – and leant in. “My child,” he beseeched her, “speak to me or I cannot help.”

And she was there; suddenly, overwhelmingly so. She was *too* close, thinking that was the only thing a man might want from her. She was both delectable and waxy-cold.

Ben Moussa staggered back, freeing his face and hands from temptation.

“No,” he told her, unable to keep horror from his voice, “you do not understand!”

Nor did she. She thought she had, but no longer. He had puzzled her. She looked on him with widened,

troubled eyes. She was worried that she'd done wrong.

The girl was naked and marked, grievously marked. It was she who had been wronged; ben Moussa now saw that.

"I came to..."

Another sound came from behind her, from the darkness cast between two box walls. It was a beast's snort, a porcine sound rough-fashioned into words from far away.

She turned her head to it. Now she really feared.

"Seek the peace of Allah, I beg you. Look for the smiling face of..."

Her face was not smiling. She looked on ben Moussa with hate. She hissed and spat at his help.

Ben Moussa recoiled before such innocence transformed. His prayers on her behalf dried and died upon the lip. She did not want them.

Then some unseen hand slapped her back into the grave. She fell back, stiffly, like a lever, to lie in a shallow scooped trough below the floor. For a second ben Moussa could see both it and her and the earth and stone above until, through God's mercy, the image faded. Then there was just flat, slimy paving – but ben Moussa knew what lay beneath.

The beast-roar spoke again. It was still remote but coming closer: a vast distance travelled at speed. He thought he heard his name, all mangled in mockery.

Before it could arrive he left – but the cold of the cellar went with him.

"When Stalin's secret police chief, Lavrenti Beria, spotted a girl he liked, refusing his desires was not a very sensible thing to do. He liked to send bunches of flowers to his farcics. One beauty unwisely turned down his advances but thanked him for the bouquet. Beria's answer was 'it's not a bouquet. It's a wreath.' So it turned out to be."

– Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Times* review of *Beria: Stalin's First Lieutenant* by Amy Knight

He ambushed her. She traversed *Malaya Nikitskaya* street past the Embassy every day, twitching her birch brush over the gutter, doing little good but no harm either. She was old – she would know. The younger *Russ* didn't want to know: their own past, their history, was just blood and poverty, a burden to be shrugged off.

Also, she was a good woman, mistaken but good. Time and time again she'd leave off her road-sweeping to cross herself especially outside the Embassy.

"Take and eat, mother. May Allah bless you."

She'd shrieked when he'd offered her the warm rolls. In modern Russia old *babushkas* were not used to being addressed. She'd assumed this *Moor* meant her ill.

For his part, ben Moussa had not been mistaken. The old girl held his gaze and perceived he was no harm to anyone. Likewise, her clear blue eyes went clear down into her soul. She was mere years away from streaking straight to Paradise.

"And may Christ smile on you, *saracen*."

She was famished, that was plain: the state pension was a couple of packs of cigarettes nowadays, but still she paused, giving mumbled thanks to God before biting.

"I need something, mother."

For just a second she doubted him afresh. Cold commerce was the only expected transaction between humans in the Motherland she found herself in in old age.

"I have nothing, *saracen*. This brush, an empty state flat, these few clothes..."

"And memories."

Her faith in him rose again. "Ah *those*; in those I am a rich woman."

"Spare me a mere rouble or two of them, that is all I wish. I am in the cause of Allah: there are things I must know – of this place."

He reversed his thumb to indicate the Embassy behind him. The *babushka*'s eyes would not follow.

"You select bitter fruit from my stall, *saracen*. Almost everything else is better than that."

"I do not choose the meal set before me – but God commands me to eat."

She nodded understanding. Doubtless she'd dined on some fetid meals herself, a child of the revolution and then the famine and influenza scourge, a girl of the purges and the Great Patriotic War, and then marriage and babies and queuing and more purges – the only thanks the workers got for heroic survival.

"Beria lived there," she told him – and spat into the dust she must soon sweep away. "In there he ate green fruit."

"Beria was also a rather short man... He too was somewhat plump, greenish, and pale, and with soft damp hands. With his square-cut mouth and bulging eyes behind his pince-nez, he suddenly reminded me of Vujkovic, one of the chiefs of the Belgrade Royal Police who specialized in torturing Communists... a certain self-satisfaction and irony mingled with a clerk's obsequiousness and solicitude."

– *Conversations with Stalin*, Milovan Djilas, 1962

"He particularly liked very young girls – between twelve and fourteen. His entourage used to call them 'green fruit'..."

– *The Beria Papers*, Alan Williams

Times were really changing in Russia if you could buy this sort of book, quite openly, from a metro stall. This Count Tolstoy – an Englishman with a *Russ* name! – didn't spare you anything. *Stalin's Secret War* – here was all the dirt you could stomach and more. Ben Moussa had sipped gingerly at it, a few pages at a time. He knew some of the dreadful stories would never leave him.

His English was not good. He had tried hard to learn but Allah chose not to give him a nimble mind. Still, what he had sufficed: he could pick out the main words enough to understand. If anything, ben Moussa wished Allah had blessed him less: sometimes there was joy in understanding nothing.

Often he thought the girl – or girls – read with him, looking over his stooped shoulders into the lamp's pool of light. That, even more than the contents, would explain the chill generated. Yet when he turned to look there was no one there: just half-heard giggles from the dark. Ben Moussa suspected they – or someone – were playing with him. He kept his mind and fingertip on the concluding page.

Beria moderated the great purges but, newly head of the secret police, did not twist the taps to stop the

flow of blood. He had stood there for 20 more years, watching it pour. His hand had not moved, his lips only smiled. The mass deportations, the labour camps, the great Gulag, 15 million-strong, were his. The 10,000 Poles forever in Katyn Wood were his, and so was Stalin's atom bomb.

He had been a busy man and at the end of the day he liked to relax at home – in his own way.

They had shot him – and ben Moussa was glad, urging the bullet on into his head – when he lost the post-Stalin struggle. One version had him killed, taken by surprise, at a Kremlin Politburo meeting. His body was kept in an inner sanctum for days till it began to stink and then they smuggled him out in a crate.

He'd had a guard, 200 Georgians back at his country *dacha*, who worshipped him almost as a tribal chief like the old-style Berber warriors back home. They had died to a man, irreconcilable, shelled to pieces in a proper battle. The worst could sometimes beguile the best.

Beria loved music – had the best record collection in Russia. Music by someone called Rachmaninov moved him to tears with its beauty...

Ben Moussa put the book in the bin; it had served its purpose but he did not wish to be troubled by it again. It contained information but no solution.

There was another book that would really serve, the best book in the world or anywhere else: a book that cost nothing but submission and carried wisdom, not horror, in its pages.

Forewarned, forearmed, to the best of man's poor abilities, he went to fetch it.

"It was already my opinion that Beria might divert the progress of the country from a socialist to a capitalist course... He was very skilful at anything that was filthy and treacherous... Later we were given a list of more than a hundred girls and women who had been raped by Beria... Interrogating Beria, we found ourselves faced with a really awful man, a beast to whom nothing was sacred... Not only was there nothing Communist about him – he was without the slightest trace of human decency."

– *Memoirs*, Nikita Krushchev

The cellar looked pregnant like a sow; slight but obscene bulges in the floor – noticed but not understood before – now screamed out at him. The heavy air *down there* felt equally expectant.

For once the stairs did not proclaim his arrival. Their wood was too saturated with damp. Instead of their usual song there was the faint crunch of murdered ice-crystals.

Ben Moussa bore the *book* before him. He had faith and, now, hope. The terrible frigidity seemed to retreat, abate, before the Holy *Quran*.

There was no need to open its stiff cover; ben Moussa knew the comfort therein by heart.

"In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds, The Beneficent, the Merciful.

Owner of the Day of Judgement..."

"Al-Fatihah," the Opening, the essence of the *Quran*, smoked him out, like vermin from its hide, straight-away. Beria raised his victims at the same time, to

divert, but ben Moussa would not be distracted.

He ignored all the poor girls, sitting up like tombstones in their graves. The monster had amplified their beauty and glossed over the tokens of death. Their nakedness, the unnatural allure, reached his loins but not his head. Ben Moussa advanced on the half-seen figure lounging in the shadows.

Beria was cool and smoking. His pince-nez reflected the electric light so that he had no eyes. The lenses were focused on ben Moussa. What they saw only made him smile.

Ben Moussa brandished God's word. He noticed, from the corner of his eye, hope lighten the faces of the slaughtered. He pushed the book at Beria.

"Here is power!" His teeth were chattering, he wished to urinate, but the words emerged clearly. "Here is truth! Go to the judgement told within!"

Beria's voice was amused, ironic. It came from a faraway place. "No."

Ben Moussa would compromise: he did not care when precisely this abomination went to eternal fire. "Release those you have offended from the terror of your servitude."

"Sorry, no."

The women's faces fell. Ben Moussa saw their second death. "Take your sick spirit from these walls, haunt here no more!"

There were others with Beria now; he had support. Grey forms in uniform clustered respectfully round him. His retinue had lingered in loyalty.

"Again no. This is my house. You came later."

Then suddenly he was controlled no more. It had been a mere façade. The cigarette fell. Spittle flew everywhere. It scalded. His words came in gouts and torrents, a spluttering foul tirade. He had been mad before he died.

"There's a telephone in Stalin's coffin. He rings me. I pass on orders to Kim Il Sung – and Fidel – and Saddam! Can't have Russia? No? I'll have here. A little kingdom. I'm the Tsar. Tsar Lavrenti of *Malaya Nikitskaya*! War! Fucking War! Warhead! Warhead!"

He advanced a step, further into the light. Ben Moussa countermanded his feet's wishes. From somewhere there was piano music – calm and soothing – but mixed with screams.

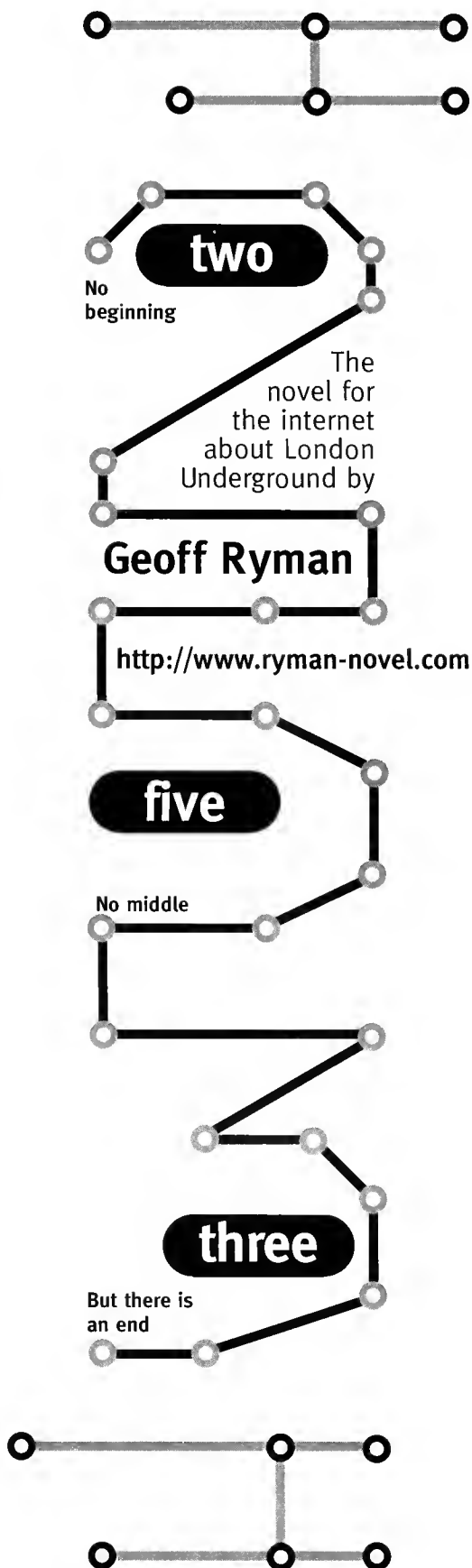
"Red Army out of Berlin – and Poland, that's what I'll do. Kiss and make up with Tito. Collective farms are crap! I'll *liquidate* them – they're gone! Let the peasants blossom. Yes! The West will love me: let me be. Russia will prosper and in the evenings we'll eat *green fruit*!"

He beckoned over one of the slain. It was the girl who'd made herself known to ben Moussa, the one who'd silently sought his help. Beria bent her over, splayed her legs and then ploughed away, treading her like a farm animal. Her eyes would not leave ben Moussa and were filled with all the sadness there had ever been.

The dead mass-murderer noted the little clerk's distress. His grin was like a rictus.

"What's the matter with you?" he laughed, still pointlessly thrusting. "Are you some sort of *communist*?"

Ben Moussa had no words; they had not been



invented. He still held out the book.

Beria sneered. "Sort him, boys."

And as the grey shapes advanced he threw back his prick-shaped head and screamed: it was the stockpiled evil and anger in him, and it went louder and higher than ben Moussa could believe. It was able to fill every corner of heaven and earth.

There remained only protest: "In the name of Allah, the Omnipotent! I command you..."

The nearest shape grew a face, a flat, thoughtless, peasant-soldier's face. A plate-like hand it already had. It used it to strike the *book* from ben Moussa's grasp. The most precious thing in ben Moussa's life went tumbling to the defiled floor.

In tears and terror he turned to the stairs, abandoning it.

The view seemed infinite, a red haze stretching away without end. From here there was almost nothing – a few salt pans, a few rocks – between ben Moussa and the deep Sahara. That appealed to him.

The little town lay behind: the next lights were in Timbuktu. Tourists came here, to the very edge of things, to gawp and then go back. Ben Moussa had stayed. Here he could await the dark. Here he could contemplate the void.

In the evening, after work and prayers, ben Moussa generally sat out on the restaurant's flat roof. There was shade and some old white plastic chairs. No one bothered him, knowing he was a man of few words and deep thoughts. He was honest and worked hard for a pittance: that was all the owner asked of his waiters.

His wanderings had stopped here; to go further required a caravan or a jeep and Ben Moussa had neither: he was alone. There had never been that little village girl. It had seemed unkind to inflict himself upon her or anyone. He had lived alone. A short walk away lay the graveyard and its tumbled pottery markers where he would rest alone.

Now he was old he had mostly forgiven fate. Brick by brick, he had rebuilt some peace. Evenings like this were when he constructed another course or checked, for the thousandth time, the foundations. He still believed. Out here, in the emptiness of the desert fringe, it was easier to believe. Accordingly, he could never leave.

Ben Moussa's thoughts were lost amid a ravine of shadow in a large clefted rock: some lost offspring of the high Atlas mountains to the north. It was dark in there: the waning sun could not bless it with light. Maybe only at noon...

"In the name of Allah, the Omnipotent..."

Ben Moussa still believed: he believed that Allah was omnipotent. But he had learned that God tolerated zones of shadow.

John Whitbourn, who makes his *Interzone* debut with the above story, is the author of the fantasy novels *A Dangerous Energy* (1992; winner of the BBC Bookshelf/Gollancz first fantasy novel competition), *Popes and Phantoms* (1993), *To Build Jerusalem* (1995) and *The Royal Changeling* (1998). See the interview with him that follows.

John Whitbourn didn't come to my wedding. "I don't like weddings," he says. "Some people don't like funerals; I don't like weddings; so I stayed home."

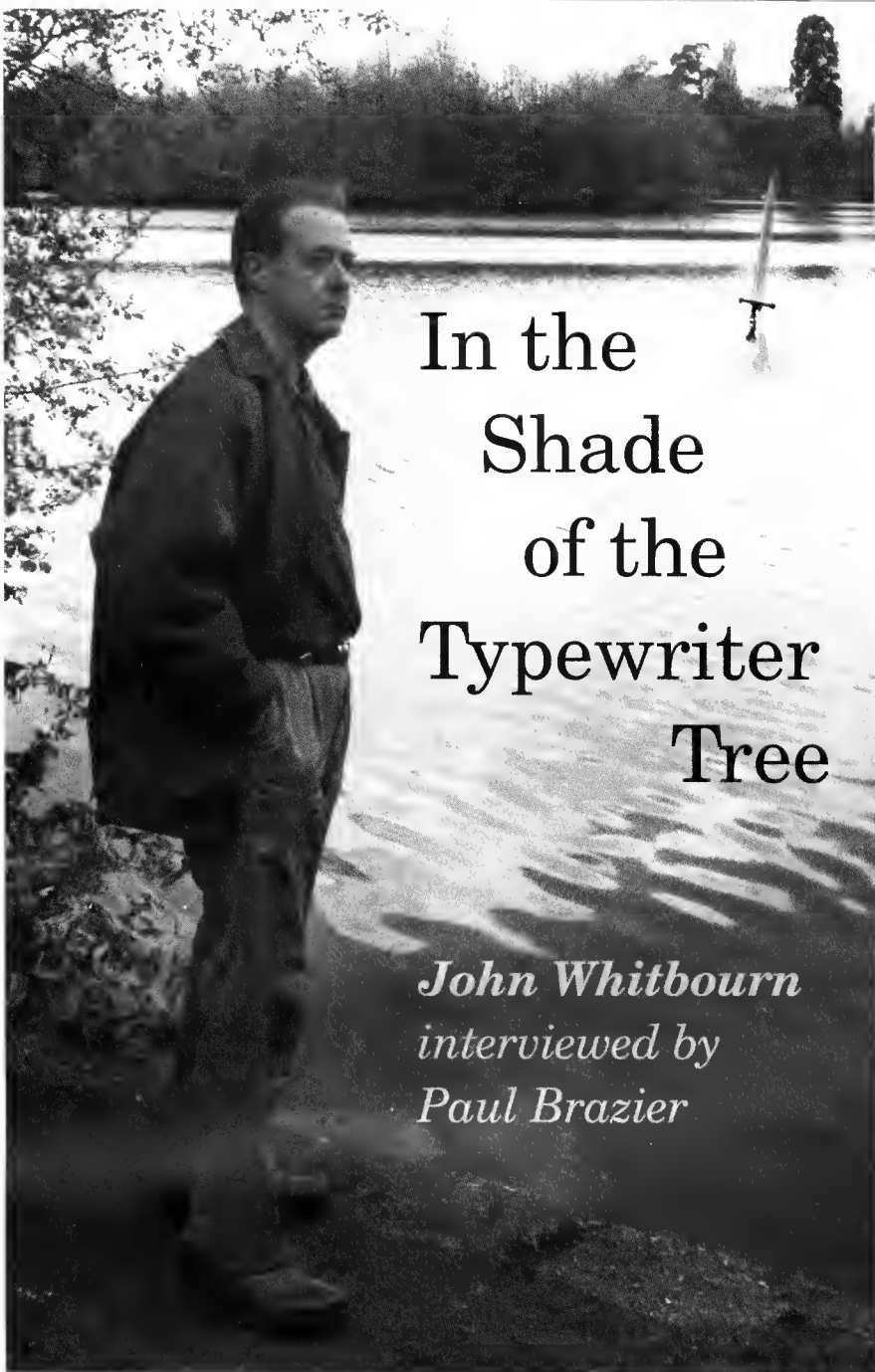
When Juliet and I were married in 1990, John and Liz Whitbourn were among the invitees because Liz and Juliet have been friends since they were three years old. The next I heard of them was when Liz rang Juliet a couple of years later to tell her that John had won the BBC Radio 4 Gollancz competition for first fantasy novels. We arranged to meet for a drink to celebrate, and since then we have met them sporadically in Pevensey and Lewes, and much beer and discussion have flowed. They have often invited us to stay in Binscombe, and this spring, with the additional promise of an interview to accompany the publication of his new books, we finally accepted.

John was at work when Juliet and I arrived, so Liz took us and their children on a walk through the woods to a local beauty spot. On the way, we were shown the Typewriter Tree. The story, which I repeated to John later, is that the typewriter had always been in this tree when John was growing up, and had inspired him to become a writer. When Richard Evans, John's editor at Gollancz, died suddenly, the typewriter disappeared from the tree. Then, quite recently, when he was about to receive the contract for his new book, he stumbled over the typewriter in the undergrowth, and with the typewriter now re-established in the tree, his career is forging ahead again.

This turns out to be a farrago of fact and fancy spun by our wives and then me in the re-telling. John's version is more matter-of-fact.

"There's an old tree by a walk that I frequently take, one of a row that were planted by a vicar or rector of Compton in the late 17th century so the villagers could have wood for coppicing. Quite a few have been struck by lightning and this one is hollow. Ever since I can remember it has had a typewriter in it, all rusted up and welded together. We always used to point it out to friends as the Typewriter Tree and speculate how it could have got there – was it some sort of dead letter drop for Russian agents?"

"A couple of years ago, as I drove past I was horrified to see workmen having a go at it, and when we went back, yes, the typewriter had disappeared. It sounds silly, but I was mortified; I'd lost a local landmark. Just recently, the very day of my 40th birthday, I went for a walk and passed this tree, wandering around the vicinity, and I actually stumbled over 'the typewriter', now upside down, partly incorporated into an ant's nest, and with plants growing through it. The workmen hadn't taken it away, they'd just chucked it. So, I unearthed it – I



don't know what people watching me must have thought – and I put it back in the tree. I felt really chuffed about it, and the children are pleased it's back as well. It was the perfect birthday present – 'The Typewriter Tree Lives Again'."

It wasn't when he got the new offer from Simon and Schuster, "but it shows how these legends grow." There is a symbolic link, though.

"Somebody suggested, if the typewriter was gone, I should update it and put my old Amstrad word processor in there, one that doesn't work any more, and I thought, when does that cease to be vandalism? It's actually just dumping, isn't it, something you shouldn't do, but... anyway, the typewriter is back. It used to be visible from the path, but I've put it right down in the bole of the tree so it's not unsightly or anything. You have to know it's there to go and see it."

No doubt it will be a place of pilgrimage in years to come as the legend of Binscombe grows. Walking with John and his family in the woods, commons, towpaths and roads around Binscombe, we became aware of how much he feels that the area and its history are as much a part of his life as his family, and how this in turn influences his story-telling.

John Whitbourn was born in Binscombe, South West Surrey, in 1958, grew up there, moved away for work and education, and returned with a wife to raise his own family. His own mother and father live literally across the road, and his brother is "just round the corner."

"I went to the infant school here in the village, then the church junior school. I failed the eleven-plus, but then everyone at my junior school did, with the exception of two teach-

ers' children – I'm not alleging any corruption, just that they were probably better tutored. I wasn't a particularly bright child, anyway. And then the local secondary modern – which you can almost see from this garden.

"After I left school, I worked for about three years before I went to University – I never intended to go, but work and me didn't get on terribly well, so I decided to go and get a degree. Everyone said that if you want a good job a degree was a prerequisite. I thought I might as well do one I could get a good result in, so I read Archaeology. I had done lots of digging – I went on my first dig when I was still at school, to excavate one of the local hill forts; I was really into it – so I thought I'd go and get the theoretical background.

"I started off at Reading, but it didn't suit me. I'm not saying I departed from Reading under a cloud, but I did depart."

Reading is destroyed horribly in *A Dangerous Energy*.

"It is. I met Edward James at Intuition, he's Professor of History at Reading [and edits *Foundation*]. He told me they are running an MA course in science fiction at Reading University now, and asked me to come back and talk to the students. He said he wouldn't be able to pay much, but I said I'd do it free, just for the sweet irony of it.

"But yes, Reading does get horribly destroyed in *A Dangerous Energy*. 'The Siege of Reading.' Several reviewers noted how horrific it is, but I based it on what I know about what happened when towns were sacked in history. No grudge against Reading, the town or university itself, it just had to be set somewhere I knew, so Reading was in the frame.

"I like Reading the town, it was just right for me at that age, a big town, but then Reading is a campus university, so you could spend all your time on campus and never interact with the people of the town the way I like to.

"So I transferred into the second year at University College Cardiff, met Liz there, very keen on the beer – Brain's – and Clarke's pies, although Liz was even keener on them. I walked in the pub the first night I got there and wondered, 'why is everybody drinking Guinness?' but it was Brain's Dark.

"I like Cardiff, it's just big enough, you can walk from one side to the other in less than an hour. I like the Welsh, the real Welsh, not the born-again Welsh who've learned the language and try to conceal the fact that they were born in Birmingham."

John sees himself more as a history man now, although there is a close fit between the subjects.

"They overlap, don't they? History was the one thing I did shine in at school. Apart from truancy, but that's

...prehistory is
the playground of
all sorts of
crackpot theories...

another story. My dad had to leave school when he was 13, but he's self-educated. He's always been interested in history, so where other mums and dads tell their kids fairy tales, my dad would tell me history – I'd say something like, 'tell me about Bonny Prince Charlie again' and, while he'd got the facts at his fingertips, he could make them come alive as a story. But the history he told me was from a different perspective from the Whig view or the victors' view of history that I was taught at school. Dad's grasp of it is more from the point-of-view of the people who got trodden on.

"He was a printer, worked for 50 years for the same newspaper, and was a trade union activist for a union that no longer exists, the National Graphical Association, which was the elite of the printing trade. He was a 'Father of the Chapel', and I believe he spoke to the Trades Union Congress once, so that was probably the impetus for him to learn about history, it's certainly where my interest came from. Archaeology is more practical, you go away to digs and stay for six weeks in the middle of forests and you have an active social life – at that age you don't want to be poring over 16th-century manuscripts."

It seems John sees archaeology as practical history.

"They overlap. Roman archaeology dovetails with written records; the two are inseparable and they are used to throw light on each other. But prehistory, that's where my grasp of the subject weakens. Certainly, in the 1970s, prehistory was the playground of all sorts of crackpot theories – so-called neo-Marxist and things like that – propounded by men with large beards

and axes to grind who couldn't convey information without lapsing into polysyllables, quoting Marx, and shoe-horning the evidence into their own theories because there is nothing to contradict them, no written records –"

(In the toilet in John's house, there is a copy of *How to Bluff in Archaeology* which says exactly the same thing. Either he is a good bluffer, or there is some truth here.)

"It's not the problem it once was. The new archaeology was very much the orthodoxy at Reading – I don't know why they called it new because it started off in the early 1960s and it was getting a bit grey around the edges by the time I encountered it."

This sounded remarkably like my own encounter with Marxist structuralism – and structural anthropology – on my English Literature course.

"It came from the same sort of incestuous marriage of ideas, sort of half-brothers and sisters. When I was at Cardiff there was a furore in the English Literature department that I could just watch from a distance and laugh. People I knew who were doing Eng. Lit. told me that they could never just read a book; it had to be interpreted by an expert who could tell you what the author *really* meant, what it signified. That structuralism, the new archaeology, is what I call obscurantism. It's saying 'you people can't understand this, it's far too complicated, but come to us and we'll explain it to you'. They're corralling the subject off to themselves and professionalizing it. They would deny it of course, but they were trying to turn themselves into the priesthood of the subject. And that runs counter to everything that I find amenable."

John has had little other formal education.

"My dad taught me a lot, and they tried to ram stuff into me at school, some of which must have stuck, but a large part of my latter-day education was reading books in public libraries at random, which was OK, but not very structured. There are great gaps in my knowledge.

"For instance, one of my great interests is astronomy, but I'll never be able to get into it because I don't have the background in maths and science and not the time or the inclination to really master the subject. So I can only read other people's digest of discoveries in astronomy.

"The only programme I watch regularly on television is *The Sky at Night*, despite that fact that it's on at a quarter to one on a Monday morning. I often don't understand what the hell they're on about, but I'm sure it's very profound."

John's father is evidently a huge influence, and from him John gets his love of story-telling.

"My dad comes from a tradition of story-telling, an old tradition, I think

his dad was the same with him, and for all I know his dad before him. I like to think it's a tradition among the Whitbourns.

"William Cobbett, agitator, politician, and all-round Surrey hero from the 18th and 19th centuries, who became an MP and wrote marvellous books – *Rural Rides* is his most famous one – said there was a long tradition of radical yeoman opinion in this part of the south. I think I'm probably part of that, although you can't trace the line because it's never written down, it's an oral tradition, handed from parent to child.

"When I was learning at school from text books, I remember thinking that it didn't fit with what my dad told me about what had happened to the English people. Nowadays, what I think is the truth about what really happened is starting to break through. It's a cliché that history is written by the victors, but it really is.

"Take Macaulay's famous two-volume history of England. The man writes like an angel, it's fantastic stuff – you can read his history for pleasure. Apparently, his tenants used to gather in his house in the evenings and he would read to them from it. So you can enjoy it as a story, but it's a tendentious load of propaganda. James II was apparently a fiend incarnate and history was just sitting there waiting for William of Orange to come and usher us into the modern age of English bourgeois democracy. And it just didn't happen that way – but that's what you're taught. The Whig version of history is still pretty much the default version of history that we are taught."

The term 'the Whig version of history' was familiar, but not clear. John explained.

"In the 19th century there were Whig and Tory versions of history. The Whig version is that things are inevitable, life is going to get better

and better, and the power of reason will sort out any remaining problems. Historically, it was a radical tradition. It's what led to the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688, and comes from the Parliamentary or Roundhead side of the civil war. The problem is that it seems to want to freeze progress at around 1850, with an educated and prosperous bourgeoisie in charge of the country, running it for the best of everyone else. Of course, you can't stop it that way. In a similar way, Gibbon initially approved of the French Revolution, but thought it went too far. He wanted it to stop where the bourgeois parliament took over and ran things rationally and sensibly. He was appalled by the tales of the terror, especially when the Jacobins started taking charge. It had gone too far.

"My grasp of the Tory version isn't brilliant, but it seems to say that history is more random, it doesn't always advance to better things, and that people don't always act in the best interests of themselves. It is probably a less deterministic view of history, but it's more or less died out."

This cleared up in the interviewer's mind a confusion caused by other friends observing that modern conservatives are more Whigs than Tories.

"I think that would have been true during the Thatcher era. They were quite radical. If you look at the early years of Mrs Thatcher, she was really having a go at all the entrenched establishments. People think the trade unions were bad, but look at a really entrenched middle-class profession when it's threatened. They go for the jugular. The Law, the Universities, and the teaching professions had never really been challenged in their secure position, their hegemony, and that explains a lot of the venom against Mrs Thatcher in the press. She probably was more radical than the Labour Party at that time,

because they wanted to keep things pretty much as they were."

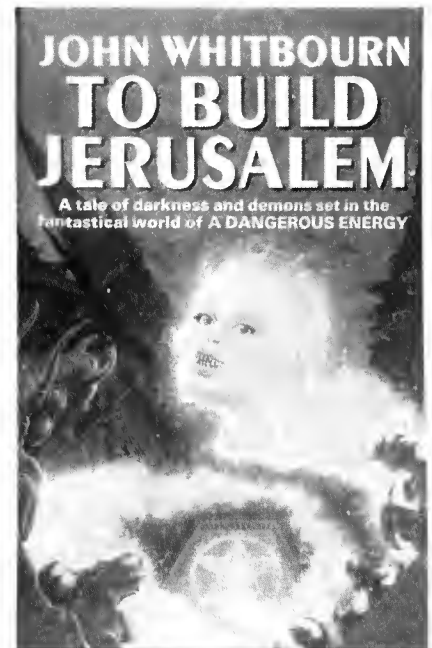
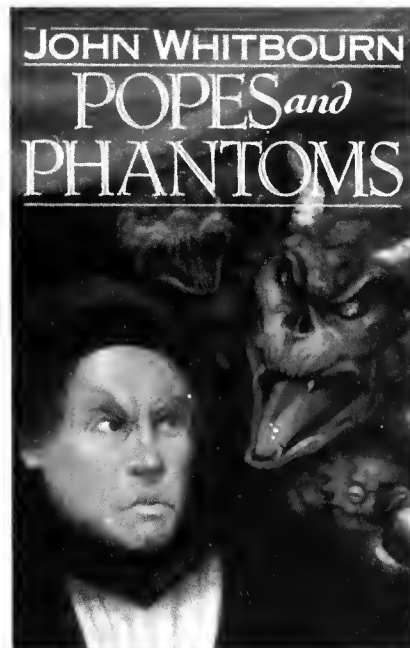
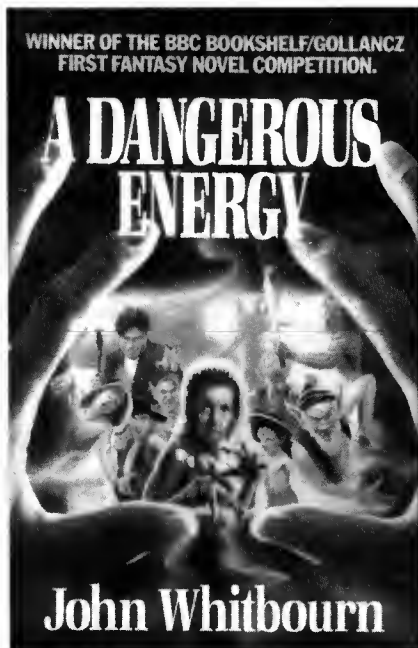
Despite the degree, John had a lot of trouble finding a good job. He worked for a while next to St Thomas's hospital at the General Laying-In Hospital, the first custom-built maternity hospital in this country, in the Organizational Methods section. They never seemed to have any work for him to do, so most of his time there was spent with a bunch of very lively contractors in the nearby Jubilee Inn [now the London home of the monthly BSFA meetings] or at Ali's Kebab House which was just around the corner in The Cut.

"It was getting to be not economic for me to go to work; I was spending more than I was getting paid.

"The Jubilee is across the road from County Hall, the old GLC building. Did you know that GLC employees used start to go home at about three o'clock in the afternoon? We used to see them sneaking out of side doors.

"It was strange. I had to do some studies down in the howels of St Thomas's, or Guy's Hospitals. It's another world – there were 32 languages spoken down there, and none of them English. I could tell stories no-one would believe – The Man With Asbestos Arms, for instance. There was a man whose job was washing up the big containers they cooked the food in, and although the water was almost boiling this chap used to be up to his elbows in it, scrubbing away. He had no feeling in his arms, apparently, but he was kept on because he was so good at getting the dirt and cack off these trays.

"After that, I went back into local government. I did revenue collection and debt collection work, I was in the recovery section, arranging court hearings and bailiffs, and then moved on into my present job as a civil servant."



John Whitbourn started writing at a very early age. "I did actually write some stories at junior school..."

"Mum and Dad copied them out into little books which I've still got upstairs. There was a long-running series called *The Little Men*. They lived on Saturn and had this vast array of enemies, all different races. A couple of other boys were into this and used to do drawings, and I wrote a book about it. And another story about a boy who found a monster under his bed and adopted it as a pet.

"But serious writing, well – I started writing the Binscombe tales, I don't know when, or why I did it, but it must have been the early 1980s. I know that I started writing *A Dangerous Energy* the first or second week I got to Reading, 1978 or '79. But why I started then, why I chose a time when you should be busy starting University, I don't know. It took a long time to write. I would come back to it every so often.

"The first story to be published was "Waiting for a Bus," one of the Binscombe tales, in 1987 [it subsequently appeared in Daw's 1988 *The Year's Best Fantasy Stories* anthology]. It was published by William Kimber Ltd, who specialised in ghost-story anthologies. I had been trying for quite a while to get something published. I was living in Guildford, and on the day my first child was born, I came home from seeing him in the hospital, absolutely exhausted – I'd had no sleep – I had some fish and chips, and there were some letters on the mat. I opened and read them, ate my fish and chips, and it was only late that night or the next day that I thought, hang on, there was an offer of publication in there – I was totally on remote control. So, my first offer of publication was on the day my son was born.

"Another strange coincidence is that the book was published on the day of the Great Storm, so I was travelling through Surrey the next day, reading my first ever published story, amidst all these scenes of destruction."

A Dangerous Energy was written over a number of years, "and then I tried to get it published. I didn't have a computer then, it was all done in longhand. I paid someone to type it for me, and then I didn't know what to do with it, how to approach publishers or anything. So I had it bound. A friend of my brother's was doing a book-binding course, so she bound it nicely in a big dark red cover. Liz sent it off to a lot of publishers, but it bounced back. As I say, I didn't know about synopses or anything. Then, years and years later, we'd practically given up when a friend of mine said that Victor Gollancz were having this first fantasy novel competition with Radio Four *Bookshelf* programme.

"So I entered, and there were five

*In most of my books
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or six hundred other entries, and out of the blue I had this letter saying I'd been short-listed, down to five or something, and would I please come to the British Fantasy Convention at the Ramada in London, 1991. I had a whole week on tenterhooks, which was a bit sadistic of them, but they wanted to make an event of it. We went up there, and they took all the authors out for a meal and we still didn't know who had won. The judges were Terry Pratchett, Mary Gentle, Nigel Ford, who was the presenter of *Bookshelf* and quite big in poetry, I believe, and Richard Evans from Gollancz, rest in peace. And something funny happened there.

"We were in the restaurant, with everyone trying to be natural, but all they were thinking was 'who's won?' and Nigel Ford comes in and says, 'Where's the bloke from Binscombe, then' (although with a different accent, and vocabulary). I said, 'it's me, probably,' and he said, 'oh, it's a wonderful place, I used to go there to visit my aunt when I was a little boy,' and we worked out which house it was. I thought, well, it's a good omen. It confirms my opinion that everything comes back to here in the end if you wait long enough. So this BBC figure, he knew Binscombe! And we went back to the convention, and they had this little ceremony, read out the results in reverse order, and they gave me the prize. Guaranteed publication!

"Richard Evans was the one in charge of editing it. Obviously it needed a lot of lot of work and he was really good, he had 30 pages of questions, but at that time it was a real treat, having someone talk to me

about my book instead of saying push off. It came out in 1992, and I'm not just saying this, but it was a much better book for Richard editing it. He pointed out a lot of faults that were obvious, but I was too close to see myself. I got some really good reviews, too. *The Times* liked it, which I'm told is rare for a first timer. It was reviewed in the historical section; they approached it as an alternative history. 'And he never looked back.'"

John's second novel for Gollancz, *Popes and Phantoms*, is set in a completely different universe.

"It's not the *Dangerous Energy* universe. It's our universe, basically. The difference is... There was a review of both books together in *Foundation*, which was really good – there were even bits of it I could understand. It pointed out that *A Dangerous Energy* was a world where everything has been altered, whereas in *Popes and Phantoms* the world is altered to make everything turn out like it is now; it was going on other pathways, and the hero and the conspiracy he is part of are working away to make sure that it goes into the world that we know – converting it into our world."

Both worlds are hinted at in *The Royal Changeling* too; you can see both futures.

"In most of my books there are glimpses of other worlds, other futures: I like that."

All of John's books tell very dark stories, but they're still a lot of fun, and some, especially *The Royal Changeling*, are downright humorous in parts.

"There is a lot more humour in *The Royal Changeling*. I like to try to go from fairly low humour to poignant tragedy in a page or so. Other writers can do it. My favourite writer is probably Isaac Bashevis Singer, and he can do that. He's the master of the short story. He can move from humour to the blackest of events in a couple of paragraphs. He was a great storyteller.

"Influences, more in the science fictional mode, have to be John Christopher's *Tripods* books, and *Princes in Waiting* sequence. And Keith Roberts.

"I've read *Pavane*. I know what it's meant to be, it's not an alternative universe, it turns out to be a successive one. It's all happened before, it's happening again. A pavane is a dance where there are two sets of actions going on in parallel to one another. But it's all happened before and the Church knows and it's trying to stop it. It doesn't bear any close examination when you sit down and think about it.

"But he's a great story-teller: the way that world is realized with all the little details, the chap with the steam wagon and so on – that world really did come alive."

The similarities with John's fiction are unmistakable.

"I was a bit worried about that when I did *A Dangerous Energy*, so I went through the book and tried to see if there was any unconscious borrowing, but I don't think there is. The thing is, if you are going to do an alternative history and you're English, probably the turning point is the Reformation or the Spanish Armada or Queen Elizabeth. It's the one you naturally gravitate towards. If you're American, it's the American Civil War, or possibly the War of Independence.

"I'm not alone in using that theme. Kingsley Amis did *The Alteration* and it's really well realized as well – a little jokey at times, but that's Kingsley Amis. And John Brunner's *Times Without Number* which was written before *Pavane*, about 1962, that's got a really well-realized world where the Spanish Armada won.

"In my books the Spanish Armada wasn't that crucial. If it had been lucky it would have got ashore, and if it had got ashore it would have won, but that doesn't necessarily create the world of *Pavane*. A lot of things could have happened subsequent to that. The Spanish couldn't occupy England forever. I think it might have had the opposite effect. People would have seen Catholicism as a foreign imposed force.

"But it's a natural point to concentrate on, as I say. I wish Keith Roberts had written more. I've got the book with the extra chapter, 'The White Boat', but I don't think it added anything. Maybe I'm just being stupid, but I didn't understand it.

"The other major influence was Dr M.A.R. Barker – that stands for Mohammed Abdul Rahmann Barker, he is a Moslem, but people just call him Phil. He created a role playing game called *Empire of the Petal Throne* in the early 1970s. He has spent literally his entire life working out this world in fantastic detail. He is a linguist and, like Tolkien, worked

out entire languages, fauna and flora, but he's been dogged by a curse in trying to get it published. I think at one point he had got the book produced, but then a whirlwind hit the warehouse.

"It really was the Rolls-Royce of role-playing games. You still meet people who know it and love it. He had two novels published that were set in that world; *Man of Gold* and *Flamesong*, and he could not only create a world, he could write a damn good novel as well. He's elderly now, and not too well, I understand, but that's a man who dedicated his entire life to working out a believable world, and I dedicated *To Build Jerusalem* to him. It's one of the great achievements of science fiction/fantasy literature, and I wish he was more celebrated."

John writes with the same kind of rigour, as if he were writing science fiction rather than fantasy.

"I don't like anything too sloppy. There has to be internal logic. It's got to be a world that works. If all your problems can be solved by a wizard waving a wand, then there's no drama, no conflict."

Part of this rigour is that the people – and especially the elves – in John's books pay the price for the magic they wield.

"That's the authorial hand. I could just as easily turn it around the other way and have them all prosper and succeed through it. The elves are meant to be melancholy and tragic figures but the gist is that they don't see it that way. The human characters often think how can they bear this? How can they put up with this? But to the elves it's no problem at all. If they die, they die, that's it, they simply cease to be. They don't have the problems of the humans who have to consider what comes in the afterlife. But, yes, the elves are meant to be tragic vestigial figures. They are on an his-

torical retreat, trying to survive."

Many writers who do fantasy seem to have some misty rose-coloured romantic idea of historic periods, and particularly the Middle Ages. John's historic settings aren't at all romantic.

"You can go to the other extreme as well. To some historians, especially regarding the Victorian era, the past was a holocaust. It wasn't that way either. Some people lived out long and happy lives. Historians who concentrate on the statistics of poverty give the impression that life was one unbearable grind, and you wonder why everyone didn't commit suicide. People had good times and festivities and events, and the consolation of family, and achievements, pretty much like now. Our descendants will probably look back on us and wonder how we managed to keep going with the threat of nuclear holocaust and all that pollution; you get by; you don't think about it all the time.

"You can accent the night side, only see the down side. But, no, I don't like these implausibly clean princes and princesses in the Middle Ages."

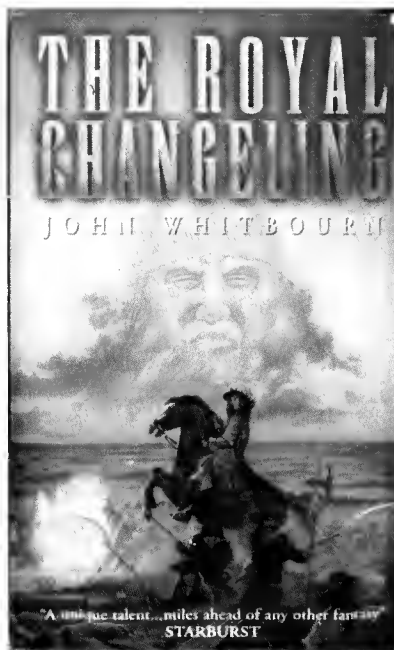
Not only are they implausibly clean; they seem to be the only people who ever do anything, who *can* do anything.

"I don't like those sort of things because they don't ring true. This couldn't be a world that ever really existed. It's the difference between realism and reality. You read a book you don't want reality, if you want that you go and read Martin Amis or something.

"The other thing I don't like about modern writers is that they can't tell a story to save their life. Or if they can, it seems to be really below the salt."

It seemed we had moved from fantasists to the Hampstead set.

"Martin Amis, yes. And Salman Rushdie. But Isaac Bashevis Singer is 'just' a story-teller. And he says that



BINSCOMBE TALES



John Whitbourn

stories never get stale. People will always be interested in them. It seems to me that if you want to be treated as a grown up in modern literature you mustn't tell a story, or else you have to just sneak it in in some ironic way and distance yourself from it.

"I like story-telling. I tell a story and then inject a character into it. I like to make sure that you can believe in all the characters in a book as people. There's no one in there with a walk-on role, or a cardboard character, or there to exemplify some virtue or vice; they're all meant to be people in their own right. People commented on the fact that in *A Dangerous Energy* often the little minor characters who were going to be killed two pages on had a full biography; you knew where they came from, and the same was true in *To Build Jerusalem*. Some editors said, 'we don't really need to know this,' but we have to treat them as people in their own right, not as part of the background. Jacko, in *To Build Jerusalem*, he doesn't play a big part in the story at all, but I mention his Arundel background and how he's now a foreigner in Guildford, and what he does with his days when he's not having walk-on roles in other people's bigger lives. It makes the world more real.

"In some fiction, you might think the characters vanish into thin air when they're no longer involved in a scene. I like people to think, OK the main characters are up to something, but Jacko is still up to his job too. Off-stage, he's still carrying on. I don't just drag him back on when I need him – take him out of his box again –"

This, for me, is the reason John's stories end up reading so believably, despite the amazing events that are taking place.

"Well I hope so, yes. Someone, one of the reviewers, says that my worlds *work*; the taxation system works, agriculture seems to work, and I took that as high praise, because that was entirely my intention."

John has recently moved from Gollancz to Simon and Schuster, and their new Earthlight imprint, under the care of editor John Jarrold.

His new book, *The Royal Changeling* (original title *Elves and Muskets*) appeared from them recently.

"It's an historical fantasy set around the battle of Sedgemoor in 1685, which is when this country was just on the very verge of modernity, the modern world arriving, William of Orange, the Bank of England, the National Debt, paper money. It's also the last time that England was its own country, before the union with Scotland. It's the last time you could say that what was going on in England was intrinsically English as opposed to British. It was an interesting period."

...we have to treat
them as people
in their own right,
not as part of
the background.

At the same time, the first volume of *The Binscombe Tales* was published in Canada by the Ash Tree Press. It collects his short ghost stories and fantasies that are set in his native Binscombe and were first published in various collections, and Rosemary Pardoe's delightful chapbooks. "We're collecting all 26 stories together into two volumes with an introduction and one grand story at the end that rounds it all off."

"I've been offered a three-book contract by Simon and Schuster, for a series. It's still in the early stages, but the core of the story is that there is a chap who can travel between our world and another England. The alternative England is geographically the same, but has had a radically different human history. Mankind is a hunted meat species kept down by a large predator. Of course, he sets about changing that. From being a fairly downtrodden and self-effacing person in this world – it's set in the 1700s, and he is an Anglican curate – he goes on to be an omnipotent god-emperor in the other world he has created and he obviously much prefers that one. It's considerably darker than *The Royal Changeling*, but there's still a little humour."

Already written is a third novel set in the world of *A Dangerous Energy* and *To Build Jerusalem* called *The Two Confessions*, but there are no plans to publish it at the moment. It is every bit as good as the other two novels, and John Jarrold should try to find space in his publishing schedule for it.

"*A Dangerous Energy* is set in the world of the church, *To Build Jerusalem* in the world of high politics

and the military, and *The Two Confessions*, completing the trilogy, is set in the milieu of industrialists – or would-be industrialists, because that's very much restricted by the Church, trade and guild regulations. There's a chap who wants to be, who is destined to be, one of the great proto-industrialists, who finds his path in every way thwarted by the Church which is dictating how much he can pay his workers, and what he can and cannot do. The book rounds that world off, and brings it back to its beginning in a great cycle. There are cameo appearances by other characters from the previous books, and it is set partly underground. There's a vast dark conspiracy going on to alter the world as they know it, and he does turn out to be a catalyst for major world-changing developments, though not in the way he thought. It's set firstly in Lewes, and then in Devon, mostly underground in Devon.

There is a lot of religion in John's books. When I first met him I asked him straight out if he was a Roman Catholic, and he avoided the question. Now he is more wedded to promoting his work, he was more forthcoming in his reply.

"My books are all written from a monotheistic perspective. Some of the American reviewers have touched on that, but it's a real change to have a book where most of the characters implicitly believe in a deity because that's the world they come from."

Surely most people believed in God in England in the time his books are set.

"As far as we can tell. We can never know what was actually going on in people's heads. You only know what they wrote down.

"This goes back to what I was saying about the changing perspectives of history. We were taught that the Reformation was eagerly awaited by the people of England who then seized on it with great vigour, smashed all the images and relics in their church, ousted the Pope and his priests, and then modern Europe began and everyone was happy. It just didn't happen that way.

"There's now some fantastic work being done, principally by a chap called Eamon Duffy, a historian, who wrote a massive work called *The Stripping of the Altars*. It's now generally admitted that the Reformation was imposed upon the people from above by a very active and quite often foreign elite serving the purposes of a particular monarch and class interest, and that the reason the Reformation is so embedded in England is that particular ruling classes gained their position from the Reformation, from seizure of the church lands and so on. They had an overwhelming interest in not going back to the former days.

"Even Mary, when she restored the

Catholic Church, had to compromise and say that there was going to be no attempt to regain the monastery lands, because then she would have had unified opposition to her from all the powerful classes. But it was imposed from above on a reluctant population, they had to enforce it by law and penalty, and it was only 20 to 50 years later that they got the great weight of social conformity on their side to create the momentum that actually turned this country into a protestant country.

"By Elizabeth's time, this was not a protestant country, it was a split country. There was a large proportion, nobody knows how many, perhaps a third, who remained Catholics, a tiny minority of active protestants, and the rest were indifferent or confused. They'd seen things declared holy, then they weren't, then they were again, now they're not any more – of course it undermined the entire belief."

"In *The Stripping of the Altars*, Duffy shows how vital religion was in pre-Reformation England. There was a huge number of confraternities and religious associations that people belonged to – even some small towns had 40 or 50 of them. They all had their special Saint's Days when they would gather and have a feast; they provided for each other in sickness; they paid a small subscription; and would look after each other's children in case of misfortune. The society went on to say masses on the anniversary of your death, helping you to heaven. You were part and parcel not just of the people who were alive in this country at the time, but your ancestors and the people who were yet to come. And just when it was at its height, it was destroyed in the only way it could be destroyed, by a blow from above. It couldn't have been done from below. There were religious reformists like the Lollards, but they didn't make much impression."

"So, that's one way that the teaching of history has changed in my lifetime, because the Reformation can no longer be taught the way it was in the old days because it doesn't accord with the facts."

"Same with Guy Fawkes. No longer the devil incarnate, but a brave man, however misguided, who was one of many – he wasn't even the leader; he was a conspirator. James I promised, when he came to the throne of England, he would cease the persecution of the Catholics, and the Catholic people took him at his word. And when he came to England he did exactly the opposite: he increased the persecution to much worse levels. That's where that desperation was born, with Guy Fawkes and so forth, to actually try to murder him."

"But Guy Fawkes also saw it as a patriotic thing. When James came down from Scotland, he brought all his Scottish nobles with him, Scottish

carpetbaggers basically, who colonized the court and senior trading positions. When they interrogated Guy Fawkes, he bravely said that his intention was 'to blow you and all your Scottish beggars back to your mountains'. But you don't read that in the history books, or you didn't used to. He was supposed to be just an evil man who was trying to blow the king up. You didn't know why he was trying to do it, or what the background was."



Photograph: Paul Brazier

"So, in *To Build Jerusalem*, I have him being successful, and I have to admit I wish he had been." Partly, this is because John is a Roman Catholic, "but also in the interests of justice."

Beginning this interview with the conviction from reading his works that John was a Roman Catholic, it was good to have it confirmed at last. However, it became obvious that he also had a powerful Marxist/Communist background, and that he had somehow satisfactorily reconciled the two. Now, it became clear. To John, Catholicism is the religion of the people.

"Not any more, it's not, but it should be."

"Since then, history has been the imposition of very bad conditions on the broad mass of people by a very small class. You can still see it today, that elitist attitude among the media. I don't think that they think that English people have a culture, not really."

"Well they do. There is a culture of the people. There is their football, and their flower shows, and their gardening and their angling, often quite private introverted pleasures, but it's a culture all the same. Which is why you have to have massive state subsidy for opera, because it is an elitist culture. No one talks about subsidizing football, or angling clubs, or gardening, do they?"

"It's the same in Arab countries. There is the phenomenon of the alienated elite, where the elite is in charge but has no real understanding of the people they rule. The masses are Islamic; the rulers drink a lot of scotch, dress in western fashions and get educated abroad. We have the same phenomenon here. Only it's not quite so visible."

Many highly respected authors, from Gene Wolfe to Gwyneth Jones, are also Catholic. It is possible that their preponderance is something to do with the way Catholics are trained from a very early age to interpret.

"I don't know. That's a big subject. There's no glib answer to that one."

Given that he is a Catholic, it is not unreasonable to expect that there might be some symbolic interpretation of his books.

"They're just stories. I hate it when people do allegories, or propaganda. OK, you can allow Orwell his *Animal Farm*, but it's usually done in such a clod-hopping way, it wrings out any pleasure in the story. No. Definitely not."

The picture at the beginning of this interview is of John standing by the very lake (at the centre of which is an island which is perfectly circular) from which his hero takes Excalibur in *The Royal Changeling*. During the weekend we spent with the Whitbourns, we were shown not only the Typewriter Tree, but the site where the first yeoman Whitbourn farmer to come to Binscombe had his farm, and a 16th century cider house (where we quaffed the wares gratefully). We didn't see the Argyll (the pub that features in many Binscombe Tales) because it doesn't exist, but we did see the site where the pub it was modelled on stood before it was demolished. We met John's children and his parents, and we came away with the overwhelming impression that they are immersed in their history: it is not an external subject to be studied, but rather a way of life. We are all in and of our histories, and telling the stories is an essential part of keeping that alive. John Whitbourn touches on all these things in his books, but never loses sight of the fact that it is the people who are important. The importance of his writing to him is evidenced by the fact that he has reduced his day job to four days a week in order to concentrate on producing the new books for Earthlight.

As his family bustled cheerfully around us, bringing plates and cutlery and beer and salad and home-made pizza, I began to pack up my equipment. John muttered one final comment into the microphone before I put it away, and I include it here for the sake of the record.

"Think of my poor starving children and buy my books. Thank you." **IZ**

Once I wrote a semi-sf satire about nuclear research, and still keep finding my jokes outdone by reality. Yes, I lacked the nerve to invent uranium reprocessing plant inspectors who, as has emerged from 1950s Cincinnati records, checked the concentration of uranium by sprinkling it on their tongues to see if it tasted right...

THE WRECKS OF TIME

Douglas Adams should be delivering the script of the long-threatened *Hitch-Hiker's Guide* movie around now – to Disney. “People may frown and think the film will be like *Bambi*,” he said. “But remember that Disney did *Pulp Fiction* too. So the *HH* film will be a mixture of *Bambi* and *Pulp Fiction*...”

Carlos Castaneda, whose “nonfiction” about Yaqui Indian shaman Don Juan and associated druggie mysticism was perhaps best appreciated as unevenly written fantasy, died from liver cancer on 27 April. His birth year remains mysterious: some say 1925, others 1931.

Steve Gallagher has an eerie sense of having found his niche, ever since a Whitehaven bookshop shelved his *Nightmare, With Angel* under the heading “Thick Fiction.”

Diana Wynne Jones survived another long and dangerous spinal operation in early July, and was last reported as grumpy (“Anaesthesia always puts her into a filthy temper”) but on the mend.

Peter Nilson (1937-1998), Swedish astronomer and best-selling sf author in the 80s, died on 8 March. He was 60.

Maureen O'Sullivan (1911-1998), the Irish-born actress who came to fame as Jane in the 1930s Johnny Weissmuller *Tarzan* films, died on 23 Jun, aged 87. She had 60+ movie credits from 1930 to 1986, and was Mia Farrow's mother.

Terry Pratchett OBE officially received this arcane British honour for his services to literature. *Terry*: “I suspect the ‘services to literature’ consisted of refraining from trying to write any. Still, I can't help feeling mightily chuffed about it.” Probably less chuffed is Lord Archer, who according to HarperCollins rumour complained in person to several bookshops who'd believed the obviously unreliable best-seller lists and put his novel at #2, with *The Last Continent* at #1...

Alison Spedding, a UK anthropologist and historical-fantasy author now living abroad, has been imprisoned in Bolivia on suspicion of drugs dealing. Apparently there's been no formal arrest or charge, nor prospect of a trial. One editor notes that “she was perhaps treading on dangerous drug-related political ground,” having announced that she was writing “a thriller set in 1984 Bolivia (hyperinflation and the cocaine trade)” and

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

that coca leaf was “the principal subject of my anthropological work.”

Dave Wolverton was not too perturbed to be outed as the writer behind David “Runelords” Farland – “This is one of those loosely kept secrets” – but hopes the leak won't affect sales. For a small fee, this column will announce that its story was wrong and that Farland is really Lionel Fanthorpe.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Publishers & Sinners. *Ellen Datlow* and her team were slightly embarrassed to find that their sf/fantasy/horror web magazine title *Event Horizon* (launched in August) was already being used by, of all things, a web magazine. Which has since been persuaded to change its name. Next episode: Ellen discovers this movie using her title, and... (*Event Horizon* is at <http://www.ehorizon.com/eventhorizon>.) Meanwhile, *Weird Tales* is again being edited by George Scithers, who is looking for submissions: 123 Crooked Lane, King of Prussia, PA 19406-2570, USA.

Bram Stoker Awards. Novel: *Children of the Dusk* by Janet Berliner & George Guthridge. First Novel: *Lives of the Monster Dogs* by Kirsten Bakis. Novelette: “The Big Blow” by Joe R. Lansdale. Short: “Rat Food” by Edo van Belkom & David Nickle. Collection: *Exorcisms and Ecstasies* by Karl Edward Wagner, ed Stephen Jones. Non-Fiction: *Dark Thoughts: On Writing* by Stanley Wiater. Life Achievement: William Peter Blatty, Jack Williamson.

The Critical Heritage. From a US local paper's TV-movie listing: “Transported to a surreal landscape, a young girl kills the first person she encounters then teams up with three total strangers and plots to kill again.” Fans will have instantly identified *The Wizard of Oz*.

Mythopoeic Awards. As we go to press I hear that the General Scholarship (not confined to Inklings stud-

ies) category was won by *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* ed. Johns Clute and Grant. Whoopee!

Inverted World. When Iain (M.) Banks signed *Inversions* at Birmingham's Andromeda Bookshop, several copies proved to have been bound upside-down in their jackets. Cries of glee were heard from proprietor Rog Peyton: “A special INVERTED edition of *Inversions*! Signed and numbered by the author! People will pay extra for this!”

Seeds of Time. That huge archive of John Wyndham's manuscripts, and letters has indeed been acquired by Liverpool University – where it joins the SF Foundation collection and the Olaf Stapledon archive. Much of the money came from the Heritage Lottery Fund. From the SFF press release: “Recent BBC Radio 4 adaptations of *The Kraken Wakes* and *Chocky*, and the optioning of virtually the entire Wyndham catalogue by Samuelson Productions, the makers of *Wilde*, show that interest in the author remains strong. At least one biography is being planned.”

Thog's Language Lessons: Vrilya. The speaker is a philosopher belonging to a humanoid race evolved from frogs: “Humble yourselves, my descendants; the father of your race was a *twat* (tadpole).” (Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Coming Race*, 1871)

The Dark Fantasy Newsletter is a new small-press venture, launched in July. A5 16-20pp, £1; cheques to S. Ross, 11 Vernon Close, Eastbourne, E.Sussex, BN23 6AN.

Update. Following his wrath that £20 tickets were being sold for a theoretically free *Babylon 5* screening in London, J. Michael Straczynski announced that the UK company involved “has been taken out of the loop” and that any takings would be refunded.

Thog's Masterclass. “On the far horizon a huge red sun was setting like a pool of coagulating blood.” (Chris Evans, *The Insider*, 1981)... “Sickened himself, Leo glanced up the corridor to be sure he was still unobserved, swallowed the clot of impotent rage growing in his throat, and slipped inside.” (Lois McMaster Bujold, *Falling Free*, 1988)... “She felt the radiance of her own smile die, felt it slip from her face to land rather heavily somewhere in her stomach.” (Lisa Tuttle, *The Pillow Friend*, 1996)... *Dept of Probably Not Very PC*: “Emma Margolis folded down the poufy floral print comforter.” (Elise Title, *Bleeding Hearts*, 1996)... “The stars descended upon me like an elevator in a shaft.” (Ross Macdonald, *Trouble Follows Me*, 1946)... *Dept of Tautology*: “The annular rings turned.” (Gregory Benford, *In The Ocean Of Night*, 1977)

The LATE M Movie

Thomas M. Disch
Thomas M. Disch

I There he was, this afternoon, standing outside the back door of the house. He hadn't rung the bell or knocked. I don't recall now why I'd gone into the kitchen. The inner door was open to let in the breeze through the screen door, and there he stood. I knew him at a glance, of course. He looks just like me. Even our beards have gone grey in the same way. But here's the thing – I don't have an identical twin.

So, I thought, this must be a dream. He must have read my mind, because he spoke at just that moment and said no, I wasn't dreaming. He was my identical twin all right, but there was no time to explain. He was in trouble, but he couldn't explain that either. I would have to trust him. What he wanted me to do was to swap lives. He'd take over my life, I'd have his.

Well, I became sarcastic. Had he ever read *A Tale of Two Cities*? I wanted to know. He shook his head. "I always meant to," he said.

I didn't try to explain. "I can't do anything," I told him, "unless you tell me what kind of trouble you are in." He said murder.

Until that moment I had felt only a kind of excitement, as though there were music in back of everything, as though my life had speeded up somehow. But now I began to be scared. Come in, I told him. have some coffee with me. I didn't want him to know what I was really feeling. I clicked open the latch of the screen door.

We sat down at the kitchen table. He had automatically taken the chair I usually sit in. In the direct sunlight that comes through the window facing the river he didn't look as much like me as I had thought at first. In fact, it was only the man from UPS sitting there, embarrassed, looking down at a tepid mug of coffee. I breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment I had thought that I was trapped, that I would have to kill in sheer self-defence.

"I've got to be going now," he said, pushing away the mug. I nodded. He went back to his truck and drove off. Then I opened the package.

II He has agreed to my plan. We're twins, we have that secret sympathy, almost telepathy, but even so I was surprised at his willingness. We've been apart so long and led such different lives.

Seeing him in my own uniform made me feel, I don't know, maybe "uneasy" is the word. There was my name embroidered over his breast pocket. Sometimes, driving the truck, I get the same feeling for no reason at all. I think of all those boxes and envelopes, the names and addresses. For a couple of hours they're mine, then I never see them again. It's something I think about a lot.

I sketched out a the map that showed where I had left the trailer. I explained about the fire. I could see he was getting more and more nervous. But he was more afraid of me than he was of getting caught.

Anyhow he has agreed to go through with it. He took the keys and went out to the truck. It bucked getting into gear. I watched till the truck had reached the turnoff to the main road, then I went back in the house and explored for a while. I realized, looking through the closet in his bedroom, that being him wasn't going to be much different from being me.

I wonder if he'll come back.

III The phone lay in the grass, beeping, just out of reach. She was on her stomach, half asleep. Her right hand rested against a stack of cinderblocks on which the trailer had been mounted.

She heard the screen door of the trailer open and close.

He had come back! She struggled to sit up. To show that she was not afraid.

Standing there in front of her, in his brown uniform, he seemed hesitant, as though she were some stranger. As though he did not know what they'd done. She tried to smile. He got down on one knee beside her, took the bloodied hand that rested against the cinderblock. As though it were evidence, a clue to be examined.

"I knew you would come back," she said.

He looked at her disbelievingly. And of course it was a lie. She didn't trust him. Just the opposite. Even when they had been planning the whole thing, she hadn't *trusted* him, but she had thought she'd understood him. She'd thought he was her pawn.

And if he were not? If he had, somehow, changed? She dare not let that knot slip loose. At any cost she must possess his loyalty. She ran her fingertip across his lower lip.

The touch triggered a smile, but it was not a smile she'd known before. He seemed... another man.

"I want you to make love to me," she said.

"Now? We should get out of here. In the trailer, there's..."

"I know what's in the trailer. That's why I want you to make love to me. Here. Now."

IV

Ask your doctor if Zantac is right for you. Only Zantac is Zantac. And only your doctor can tell you why you should have it. You are in a rowboat, with a beautiful woman. But somehow your health has been threatened, and no one will tell you why.

Zantac might help, it might not. Only your doctor can tell you. But here is a car that is like... It's like a tissue that has absorbed you. Even when it is standing there empty, or pirouetting slowly in the darkness, you are somehow inside it. As what it means. It needs you if it is to be complete, as a skull needs a brain.

And this woman feels a similar need. You can tell by the way she is smiling. Her eyes glisten with complicity. Her hair is grey, but so is yours, after all. Centrum. Centrum Silver.

V

The map was confusing. It had been scrawled on the back of a delivery slip with an address on Moonlight Drive.

She hated driving at night, and there was something wrong with the gears of the truck. A red light on the dashboard kept flashing: CHECK ENGINE, CHECK ENGINE. What was she supposed to do – stop the car and look under the hood? She had no idea where the engine was even located on this thing.

She'd left the two bodies where she'd found them, outside the trailer. There but for the grace of God, she'd thought.

Ahead of her on the road was a flatbed truck piled high with logs. She had to slow, and the truck itself slowed still more. She pulled over onto the shoulder and lit a cigarette, giving the truck a chance to move ahead. And as her trembling fingers held the match to the tip of the cigarette, she saw the sign for Moonlight Drive.

She turned off the headlights and headed up the one-lane asphalt road. When she saw the house ahead of her, on its own little knoll of unmowed grass, she knew that she had been here before. Long ago, as a child. And

something terrible had happened.

She parked the car in the driveway and followed the flagstone path to the back of the house. A screen door banged in the wind. Even before she went inside, she knew, by the smell of charred wood, that she'd arrived too late.

A package bomb...

And there slumped over the table was the man she'd hoped she would never see again. Yet known, always, that she must. But she'd never imagined that their last meeting would be like this.

There were footsteps inside the house, and then the kitchen lights went on, and before her, in the fluorescent glare, stood her own daughter.

She smiled, and said "Sherri, darling," and looked for somewhere to put her cigarette, so that they could embrace. How many years had it been?

"Hello, Mother," the girl said bitterly. "I *thought* you'd be coming here."

Then she raised the pistol and emptied it into my heart.

Thomas M. Disch, who lives in New York state and has a high reputation as a poet as well as a novelist, last appeared here with "The First Annual Performance Arts Festival at the Slaughter Rock Battlefield" (issue 131) – a story praised by *Locus* magazine's reviewer as "a vicious, very funny satire." His most recent book is *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (reviewed in IZ 133).



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Little **KILLERS**

Dave Stone

A Fine and Most Profound, Perspicacious

and Almost Entirely Edifying

Nathan le Shadon Mystery by Mr. D. R. Stone

From the journals of L. M. Hassanali, MD:

In these journals concerning my adventures with that renowned detective, Mr Nathan le Shadon, I believe that I have none so strange to relate as that which I now pen, and have tentatively entitled "The Little Killers." Which most unfortunate affair began, for my own part, one early summer's Sunday afternoon; I was in the first-floor apartments I share with Mrs Flatchlock, freeholder of lodgings, 57, Highbury Square, EC15. We were taking what might most propitiously be called high tea, and had indeed enjoyed several highly stimulating and invigorating cups of coffee in the approved manner, when there came a staccato and impatient ringing upon the galvanistic doorbell.

"Another visitor for our Mr le Shadon, no doubt." Mrs Flatchlock threw on a silken William Morris robe – which I personally felt to be a trifle revealing; but then, Mrs Flatchlock has always been a little forward in that way, rather more so than myself – and descended the stairs to attend to the door. Mr le Shadon receives a steady stream of outlandish visitors, from clients for his services, to members of his network of informants in the criminal underworld, to the occasional *fiendish assassin* hoping to find the Great Detective off his

guard. Strangely, for one with so keen an intellect and of such observational powers, Mr le Shadon seems to remain utterly oblivious to these visitors' very existence until somebody else, other than himself, has answered the door and shown them to his rooms. His lapse in this area is quite unaccountable.

Thus, I thought, was the nature of this interruption, but I was mistaken. From down below, Mrs Flatchlock exclaimed: "A Detective Inspector Blostradd for you. I shall take him up the passage to the parlour." Which was, of course, the height of bad manners, but allowed degree of much-needed respite to attend to my state of dress, and thus spare any possible tarnish to the reputation of Mrs Flatchlock, or indeed myself.

I tend to affect a rough tweed jacket and plus-fours for my professional duties, for purely practical reasons, since medicine is at the best of times a messy business, and the practice of Pathological Medicine even more so. This form of attire offers something of an attraction to several impressionable young ladies of my general acquaintance (I particularly recall a child, a Miss Victoria Sackville-West if I remember correctly, who was most taken by it), but there are certain other persons who find it offensive in the extreme.

Detective Inspector Blostradd was one of those per-

sons – but this was merely a part and parcel of his other dislikes. I believe that a woman – and especially a *foreign* woman – in the possession of medical qualifications struck him as an offence against nature itself. I suspect that it was only the sheer lack of qualified personnel, resulting from the general depopulation caused by of the *Sojourner* invasion, that restrained him from stating this outright, or even assaying the prospect of physical violence – as I am given to understand that the Metropolitan Police are noted for, in certain underprivileged quarters. (It was the fact of this that had me thinking long and hard on my decision to remain in London after completing my medical studies, and to assist with the rebuilding, rather than return by the swiftest available means to the mission in Tobago from whence I came.)

Inspector Blostradd glowered at me when I entered the parlour – I gather, from what others have said, that he was under the quite erroneous impression that Mr le Shadon and myself were conducting an illicit affair.

“We have a body for you,” he said. “We need a post-mortem right away.”

“Oh yes?” I said, regarding him coolly. “Correct me if I’m wrong, Inspector, but are there not more than enough mortuary staff who are actually on duty at the moment?”

“They’re needed to work on other cases,” Blostradd said, “and this one’s a slimy. Big noise in the *emigré* community, so they say, and the people up top want us to show a bit of willing. They want results. Should be right up your alley.”

That explained my being disturbed on a Sunday afternoon. Negroes, women, Maryannes, Uranians, anarchists and *Sojourners* were all the same in Inspector Blostradd’s slim cerebral *livre de poche*.

“And what,” I inquired, “would have you think that I would know more about *Sojourner* physiognomy than anybody else? What do you think that I can possibly do?”

“I don’t know,” Blostradd sneered at me. “Maybe you could rattle the bones over him or something.”

The *Sojourners* are not, of course, exactly Martians – though I understand that they have a small way-station colony on that planet. If one can believe them, they are a polymorphic quasi-gestalt entity hailing from what they call the Proximan Chain Rafts, whatever those in fact may be.

Be that as it may; the marked similarity between these creatures’ conveyances and munitions during the initial stages of their invasion has led to their inextricable linking in the public mind with the *War of the Worlds* of Mr Wells. Few will forget the sight of their great stilt-“walking” machines stalking the skylines of London and the Home Counties, laying waste to everything in their path, with contrivances that might as well have been heat rays for all the resistance mortal man could offer.

And then suddenly, without warning, after several decisive victories, the *Sojourners* simply stopped their killing and surrendered *en masse*. It appears that they were, by their lights, a small and lightly-armed exploration party, sent to establish diplomatic contact, and had been forced to defend themselves in the wake of

Earth’s own violent reaction. It appears that violence of any kind distressed them deeply, and that their one wish in using it themselves was to establish a position from which they could not be eradicated in their entirety, once peace had been established.

Whether or not to actually *believe* them was and is still hotly debated, not least by the surviving friends and relatives of the dead – but it cannot be argued that the subsequent presence of the *Sojourners* has not benefited mankind in any way at all. No one knows better than I how badly a technologically superior, if not necessarily a spiritually superior culture can behave when confronted by a lesser – and the *Sojourners* have been more than generous in the sharing of their expertise, precipitating the most burgeoning development in the fields of communication, transportation and arithmetical devices since the Industrial Revolution.

Those that now remain on Earth seem for the most part inoffensive souls, refusing to defend themselves against even the worst of the animosity still directed against them and relying, within England at least, for their protection upon English Law. A protection which is, sadly, upon occasion all too slight. (I must admit here and now that my opinions on the *Sojourners* are markedly more sympathetic than the general, perhaps because of my own situation, perhaps for the simple fact that none close to me were ever killed by them, directly.)

A sympathetic attitude, however, does not confer much expertise in dealing with their mortal remains, and I returned to 57 Highbury Square that night, from the mortuaries beneath Scotland Yard, with the feeling that I had spent the evening in a fruitless pursuit.

The *Sojourner* – who had, with what seemed to be their innate inability to comprehend proper names, named himself *Queegvogel Duck Duck Duck Duck Duck Seven* for human ears – had been found in the workshop in which he constructed prototype automata for sale to human business concerns. So far as one could tell from a bodily form which, even under ordinary circumstances, had the aspect of a large frog after a train disaster, there had been no signs of violence perpetrated upon the body; it had simply died.

And there the matter would have rested, save that the man who discovered him was the noted industrialist, Mr Simon Deed – who had struck up something of a friendly relationship with the deceased and was swearing blind that the door had been locked from the *outside*, the key still in the lock, when he had come upon it. Someone, it seemed, had been with the unfortunate Queegvogel (I trust the reader shall permit me to discard the multiple *Anatidae* and the numeric for the sake of clarity, and not to mention brevity) and that person, Mr Deed maintained, had been with him when he died.

Foul play, in short, was suspected.

As I have mentioned, there is no lack of animosity directed toward the *Sojourner* community. If murder there was, the most surprising thing about it was that a human had taken such an active part on behalf of the victim. I was mulling this aspect over as I reached my doorway, when into the square turned a liveried hansom, of the sort pulled by the miniature steam engines that operate upon distilled water superheated by pass-

ing it across radium. Highbury Square is one of the better addresses, so I thought nothing of it 'til it came smoothly to a halt beside me and a polarized window slid down by way of some concealed galvanistical contrivance.

"Miss Hassanali!" a voice called to me. "I'm sure I recognize you. You're quite the celebrity, I think, about town."

Any small celebrity I possess is entirely due to my connexion with the fame of Mr le Shadon, and I must confess to little more than anger so far as reaction to my *distinctiveness* is concerned. I turned to point out as much, and found myself looking into the very face of the man I had been thinking of scant seconds before: Mr Simon Deed.

Who has not heard of Mr Deed, or seen his image in the zoematic motion pictorials? The man who built the network of jet-propulsion airship pylons that cut inter-continental travel to a matter of days, and reconsolidated the Empire once and for all and to within an inch of its life. The man who built the majestic suspension bridge that even now spans the Irish Sea, and the hydraulic catapult that even now lobs cargo in its tons across the gap 'twixt Dover and Calais. The man who, so it is said, has designed vehicular mechanisms capable of ploughing through the very earth itself with the same ease that a submersible travels through the ocean!

Mr Deed was one of the few people who wholeheartedly and publicly welcomed the *Sojourners* amongst us, and I believe that his success in utilizing their technologies had something to do with this. Now, as I looked at his pale face, it broke into a friendly smile.

"Forgive me, please, Miss Hassanali," he said. "One sometimes tends to forget that patronization unasked for is seldom required. I was in fact hoping to find your friend le Shadon at home." He waved an airy and dismissive hand. "I have never, I admit, had the greatest of faith in our Constabulary, and I believe I have a commission for his services."

I had a mind to confer with le Shadon myself, so we repaired to his rooms together. We found him in his shirt-sleeves, absentmindedly puffing on a pipe of opiates, tinkering with a contraption as large as a wardrobe and reminiscent of the abortive counting machines of Mr Babbage, though the respective components for this seemed entirely uniform and were obviously machine-turned.

"It's an attempt to emulate the principles of a *Sojourner* timing device," he explained without turning around, aware of our presence even though I was certain we had entered silently. "The common folk think the damned things operate on *magic*, and I'm attempting to demonstrate the same general effect by purely mechanical means."

"That would certainly foster interspecies relations enormously," Mr Deed said thoughtfully, glancing toward the tiny, snuffbox-like device which le Shadon seemed to be using as a model.

"It certainly would," le Shadon said, turning at last and wiping his hands on an oily rag, "if I could get the bugger to work." He nodded to me. "Miss Hassanali."

I must say that I find it a strange pleasure to look upon the features of Mr le Shadon. He is a large, still youngish man; his face is blunt and blocky and would seem almost loutish save for the fierce intelligence blazing behind his eyes, which are of variegated hue. He is capable of formidable and even phenomenal feats of strength, and his self-assured demeanour puts me in the mind of nothing so much as the nobility of a lion – indeed, indoors, it always seems to be as if he is prowling around the confines of a cage.

In the years of our acquaintance he has become renowned as possibly the greatest consulting detective in the world, not least due to certain exploits which I in my own, small, unofficial capacity as biographer have attempted to relate. Le Shadon holds a degree in Scientific Criminology, honorary degrees in several unrelated areas and was at one point a Fellow of the Royal Society before being shown the door for hurling, so he says, a sharp retort. For some reason Mr le Shadon finds this amusing, though for the life of me I cannot discern why.

During the *Sojourner* incursion he fought valiantly on the side of humanity, and while he has no love for the aliens he now devotes much of his time to learning what he can about them. He has expressed mistrust, particularly as to the social effects of degree of technology for which we as a race are not ready – but it is the mistrust of one determined to discover the truth and its implications before forming ultimate judgment, rather than an expression of automatic bigotry.

Now he sat myself and Mr Deed down, poured us glasses of the intemperate and intoxicating spirits for which, I fear, I have acquired a taste from him, and listened to my vague musings upon the death of the *Sojourner* Queegvogel. I hoped that the small elements of mystery surrounding it might serve to pique his interest, and to a certain extent it did.

"I gather you have more to add," he said to Mr Deed, who had courteously waited 'til I had finished before speaking himself. "And I rather think that it would be something you would rather not take to the police."

The face of Mr Deed assumed an aspect I have seen before amongst those dealing with Mr le Shadon, part startlement, part pique; the face of one preparing to deliver a surprise and finding himself preempted.

"I must confess that I do," he said. "Though I would like to know how you suspected so."

Without a word Mr le Shadon crossed to one of the televisual screens that have become so popular of late, and switched it on with a rattle of its pinboard surface. From a cabinet he took a roll of punch-paper that is used to permanently record televisual images, and threaded it through the replaying mechanism, which he wound up and activated with a clatter of keys.

On the screen, in monochrome, appeared a news broadcast showing several possibly human forms draped in bloodstained sheets.

"A Mr Marcus Thead and a Mr Leviticus Crane," le Shadon said. "Found outside of a certain establishment in Cleveland Street. The reports, broadcast earlier today, told us that they had been ripped to pieces in a manner so inhuman as to make the accurate reporting of it abhorrent to delicate sensibilities."

With a small start, and a little shame, I realized that

while I had been in the pathological surgery working upon the late Queegvogel, several of my esteemed colleagues had been working upon two other cases, and I had paid not the slightest heed. These, evidently, were they.

Mr Deed was looking at the screen, ashen-faced. It was as if he had been struck a physical blow.

"Well?" said le Shadon, sharply. "I seem to recall that Messrs Thead and Crane were fellow-, or one might say *rival*-engineers in your area of expertise. It strikes me a little odd that on the day of their murders you should have nothing to say about it, no matter with what other pressing matters you have to contend."

"I..." Mr Deed's voice failed him for a moment. Then he nodded slowly. "I had no idea this had happened 'til you told me. I had hoped I might have been in time to do some good – but it appears I am too late."

"I had come to tell you something of our *Sojourners* friends. I'm sure you recall, as do I, how that during the battles with them they would occasionally, at some point, drop down dead?"

Le Shadon nodded, scowling. "Go on."

"At the time," said Mr Deed, "this was put down to some mere bacteriological infection – the mighty laid low by the smallest and most insignificant creatures on God's earth. In fact, as I learnt through talking with my friend Queegvogel over the course of years, it was that the *Sojourners* found the act of killing quite *inimical*. And to a far, far greater extent than is commonly known. You've heard, of course, the expression to die of shame? It appears that, due to their alien neurologies, that this was the actual, physical and literal truth. They died of shame."

"This only came to light, to they themselves, when they were actively involved in the War, when they found themselves dropping dead themselves after committing a certain number of murders, causing a certain number of deaths. That is the real reason they stopped, and why they are known, now, throughout the world, as the very epitome of non-violence – not out of a sense of goodness or nobility, but out of sheer self-preservation."

Mr Deed looked from le Shadon to myself dispiritedly. "When I found Queegvogel dead, with no marks on him whatsoever, I could only assume that it was because he *himself* had plotted the murder of some unfortunate individual. I came to you in the hope that you could help me discover whom, and why, and if there was any humanly possible way to prevent it. And I see that I have failed."

Le Shadon regarded him levelly. "You seem so sure that this Queegvogel committed these murders."

"As you said yourself," said Mr Deed. "They were rivals to my own small concerns, and I have gone on record for wishing them ill. Queegvogel was an associate, and extremely loyal – and since I found his body I have been dreading something of this nature." He sighed. "He must have done this out of some hideous alien expression of loyalty. I feel as if I myself am responsible."

Mr Deed rose and walked sorrowfully toward the door. I joined him and led him out through the passage to the front door.

"Be assured, Miss Hassanali, that I shall return upon

the instant should I recall anything pertinent," he said.

I opened the door for him – and three buzzing shapes streaked toward us from the street outside.

With a quite remarkable presence of mind, Mr Deed slammed the door upon the approaching projectiles and all but dragged me back to Mr le Shadon's apartments.

"They are robotic simulata!" he cried, piling heavy items against the door. "Such as are used to pacify the heathen aborigines that live near airship staging-posts on the Dark Continent! Queegvogel's work. Fiendish robotic hunter-killers. I recognize them instantly."

Mr le Shadon, meanwhile, had dived for his writing desk, and from a secret compartment had taken the clockwork-operated machine-pistola that he had once used to some effect during the *Sojourner* wars. "Queegvogel?"

From outside there came a high-pitched and mechanistic whine, and a rapidly accelerating hammering.

"Yes!" cried Mr Deed. "He must have sent them after Thead and Crane – but why should he want to send them after me? But why?"

"Hunter-killers?" I said. "That hardly sits well with what you said about *Sojourners* refusing to kill."

"They are only used on heathen savages," Mr Deed said. "Those whose race has been scientifically and phrenologically proven to be brutish and subhuman and..."

He trailed off somewhat when he noticed my expression. He turned his desperate attention to le Shadon. "But that is neither here nor there! You must save me. You must *destroy* them!"

It was at that point that the door of the apartments burst into splinters, knocking over an occasional table and a tallboy, and into the room came the projectiles we had encountered so previously before.

They were each the size of a large cat, or possibly a small dog, but of insectoid instruction, hovering on buzzing wings like mosquitoes constructed from copper and brass. Each had a barbed and glassy proboscis, each had several sets of jagged claws, and each was slathered with blood that I noted to be a dried residue rather than clotted – the discharge of extremely rapid, catastrophic blood-loss.

These things had clearly one purpose and one purpose alone: to rip all living matter to shreds. They advanced inexorably upon the now almost frantic Deed as he backed, stumbling, away.

"Destroy them, le Shadon!" he screeched.

Mr le Shadon brought up his clockwork machine-pistola... and then lowered it again.

Unaccountably, he seemed utterly unconcerned. "I'd suggest you stop them now," he remarked, mildly, to Mr Deed.

Unaccountably, again, Deed became calm himself. Calmly, he put a hand into his jacket, and pulled out a small contrivance reminiscent of a radiophonic receiver.

He depressed a switch set into its face, and the insectoid automata halted, hovering in mid-air on their whining wings.

"I see you have detected my small subterfuge, Mr le Shadon," he said, still perfectly and unaccountably calm.

I must admit that I was nonplussed, dumbfounded

and not to mention a little taken-aback. "What?" I said. "What is this?"

"It's perfectly simple," le Shadon said, raising his gun again, but this time aiming it directly at Mr Deed. "He has contrived to murder his business rivals, while establishing for himself an unshakeable alibi – namely myself.

"I believe that, like the best of liars," – this directly to Mr Deed – "you have told something of the perfect truth, especially in the manner of how *Sojourners* might die of shame. The *Sojourners* are quite capable of constructing the most horrifying of weapons; it is their actual use that disturbs and debilitates them. I believe that you yourself were in the unfortunate Queegvogel's home, that you told him of the use you had made of his automata and thus caused his death – what better way to implicate him in actual *responsibility* for the murders of which he was the unwitting progenitor? You then came to me, knowing that with the backing of such impeccable witnesses as Miss Hassanali and myself, you would be thought of as another intended victim of the plot rather than the fiendish mastermind behind it.

"Your mistake, sir, was to contrive too *elegantly*. You came here, delivered an absolutely specific amount of necessary information, and all-but-instantly arranged its demonstration. That might be permissible in a work of fiction, where superfluous matter must be cut, but it is hardly true of real life. It was the very *artificiality* of recent events that had be thinking that they could not be entirely natural."

"Ah, Mr le Shadon," said Mr Deed, airily, "I fear I am quite undone. But I cannot, in all conscience, allow you your moment of triumph..."

All this time, I had been gazing bemusedly upon the little radiophonic contrivance in Deed's hand, wondering at these revelations and inwardly kicking myself for not having suspected them from the start. Thus it was that I saw Deed's finger almost imperceptibly depress a switch.

I slapped the object from his hand. Simultaneously there was a rattle of Mr le Shadon's pistola and a small spray of blood as its discharge hit Mr Deed in the arm, knocking him away from me and spinning him around with a cry. Such was le Shadon's expertise that I felt the bullets' passing but was not hit myself.

But it was too late. The insectoid automata were even now swooping for le Shadon, their probosci extending telescopically, their claws clenching and unclenching with a sound like rapidly snipping scissors.

All of this I registered in an instant. The control device was still falling from the bloody remains of Mr Deed's hand, and I snatched it out of the air, feeling several of its switches moving under my hand.

I can only thank God that by some lucky chance they were the correct switches. The automata paused, briefly, and then changed their course toward Mr Deed, who had been moaning with shock and pain, and who now began screaming in pure and, though it pains me to admit it, considering his crimes, heart-rending terror.

The demands of writing for a general publication must now force me to draw a discrete veil over the subsequent scene – save that it seemed an eternity before I found a way to switch the little automata off, and by the time I had done so both myself and le Shadon, and extensive areas of his apartments, had been befouled by what had previously been Mr Deed.

The little assassins furled their respective wings with a clash, and fell to the carpet.

For a while we looked down, and up, and indeed around at the mortal remains of Mr Deed.

"Well," said le Shadon, "I think the first thing we must have, should the decanter not be tainted, is a bracing glass of madeira. And then, if you could be so kind, would you telephone Detective Inspector Blostradd, and have our Mrs Flatchlock come in with a mop and bucket?"

David (R.) Stone, who makes his *Interzone* debut with the above story, is the author of three "Judge Dredd" novels – *Deathmasques* (1993), *The Medusa Seed* (1994) and *Wetworks* (1994) – as well as *Sky Pirates!* (1995), *Death and Diplomacy* (1996) and other titles in the "Doctor Who" spinoff series. He says of himself: "Dave Stone is not so much a tool-using, hat-wearing biped as a carbon-based argument. He's probably best known for his books in Virgin Publishing's New Adventures line, featuring the exploits of Professor Bernice Summerfield, and he spends a lot of his time painting and decorating."

Ian R MacLeod

Stephen Baxter

fiction

Molly Brown

David Langford

Ian McDonald

Keith Brooke

insight<http://www.users.zetnet.co.uk/iplus>**infinity plus**

Nicholas Royle

Eric Brown

critique

Jonathan Wylie

SUGGAY

A TALE OF THROAT CITY

Nick Cornwell

Disbarred from practising medicine for curing people who might otherwise have gone on to die profitably in private hospitals, Vito Jehovah arrived in Throat City with more broken dreams than Broadway. He slipped into its murky streets like a diver into the mouth of a browsing whaleshark, and found a home amid the strange detritus which littered the floor of its stomach. Far from hating the maelstrom of death and meaningless violence which were the way of life in Throat, Vito breathed them in like a dental patient taking the gas, finding a grateful and shuddering relief in refuge from the awfulness of life on the Outside. Refuge or no, however, the furtive goodtimers and red-nosed powder monkeys who made up Vito's customer base in his neo-U-haul surgery were an unsatisfying clientele, deplorably devoid of exciting stab wounds and ruptured organs. The grey weight of recollection blotted Vito's *Weltanschauung*. Without truly challenging patients, he must inevitably remember the Key Lime lifestyle which caused him such pain. Throat City being the kind of place it is, the break he needed was not long in coming.

Vito was mooching in the Red Rag Club on 5th and Turquoise, the chosen hang-out of adrenaline addicts and cordite fiends, at or about the time when Vinnie Vinyl, in his midtown home, was involved in a serious exchange of views with Squid Badaboom. The phone rang in the Red Rag Club, and Vito was surprised to find himself beckoned enthusiastically to the apparatus by the manager of that place.

"I am shot," cried Vinnie, down the blower.

"Of course you are," replied Vito soothingly. "Are you not a gangland legend? It is in your nature to get shot. Marlon Agonistes got shot. Tommy Arkansas got shot. Even Dream-On Karl got shot, though admittedly only in the knee."

"I am bleeding copiously," pleaded Vinnie, but Vito was on a roll.

"The gun is the chiefest expression of our feelings," he explained. "We set great store by its magic. There can be no higher act of esteem towards an acquaintance than to expend for his or her benefit an whole clip of treasured ammunition." He might have gone on, but Vinnie managed to gurgle a plea for help, and Vito was not one to turn down a paying client in need.


"Let's hear the injury," Vito demanded, and listened closely as Vinnie held the mouthpiece to his gut.

A week later, V. Gerald Hoover (Vito's by now forgotten Baptismal name) was the toast of the post-legal denizens of Throat. His pressure bandages were reckoned the best in town, and his combat surgery made him a must-see in the event of a dangerous sucking wound.

Among the patrons of the kosher deli on Perspex Street, who were by dint of spending more time drinking coffee than actually pulling the trigger the intelligentsia of Throat, it was widely accepted that Vito was a reincarnation of Sigmund Freud, desperate to make amends to the body for his transgressions against the mind.

Months passed in a haze of gunsmoke and antiseptic, and it became gradually apparent that the ordinary madness of the city was, for a rare wonder, not enough. Vito received a bulk delivery of rubber gloves from an anonymous donor, was taken to dinner by everyone from Billy Umbilical to Eponymous Jack, and waded knee-deep in the organic soup of spirited debate. He was rich, he was busy, and he was slowly heading for a nervous breakdown in place. Vito could drown in grue one moment, and be stone-cold nostalgic the next. His desire to suffocate memory threw him like offal to a Doberman into progressively more bizarre acts of autoanaesthesia. Vito became an object of public discussion, in a place where suicidal tendencies are measured on an incremental scale. He arm-wrestled Rhett the Train, went knife-shopping with Long Cool Sarah and proposed to Ringpull Debbie. He ate food at Mama Gumbo's, and kept the knucklebones on a string around his neck, even after they were formally identified by the police. Vito was a man to whom the word tortured meant contentment. He was an onrushing train, and he was, even in Throat City, rapidly running out of track.

The outskirts of Throat are dark and belligerent. The houses look suspiciously at one another through half-closed, uneven windows, door lintels turned downward in a permanent sneer of mutual dislike. At the corner of the last street at the eastern edge of the city, where the buildings and yards give way to bleak, grey hills and stubborn trees, there stands a gate of bone. White and unrepentantly oily, it dominates the crossroads like a smirking seismologist at a San Francisco beach party. Behind the gate, in a sandstone manse blackened by the years, lives The Outlaw Loves A Whale. She stands five feet and seven inches high, bent over like a nightstick. She leans sharply to the left, supported by a yellow-white blind man's cane, and her head is covered by a deep and all-concealing cowl. Her voice is the wheels on a hospital gurney, and her hidden eyes are as clear and



penetrating as breaking glass. She is the last resort of anyone so driven that Throat cannot contain, absorb, or at least murder them. She is the only woman alive that Mama Gumbo is afraid of, old, wasted and unforgiving, mean as a weasel. So naturally, Vito Jehovah was drawn to her like a rabbit to an industrial metal press. He determined to pull the hood from her hair and plant a wet smacker on her doubtless thin, dry lips.

Mama Gumbo left Throat City that morning, carrying all her belongings in a suitcase made of pale leather.

The Soya milk in the kosher deli on Perspex Street went rancid.

Vinnie Vinyl, Bone Briskett, and Maggie Slamdunker each announced they were going to visit long-forgotten maiden aunts, all of whom lived out of state.

And three swans impaled themselves on the three tallest buildings in town.

Vito shrugged it off. He walked down Vinegar Street alone, to the staccato slamming of a hundred doors and shutters. He opened the gate of bone and walked through the garden to the front door, where The Outlaw Loves A Whale was sitting in the shadows. And there, to his own great surprise, he kneeled down and wept into the grey, ashy ground. When finally he straightened, The Outlaw reached up, and pulled back her hood.

She was old. She was ancient. A map of copperplate lines covered her features so completely that it was impossible to look at her for long, Vito's eyes just couldn't hold on to the surface of her face. She gazed back at him gravely, and Vito drank in her every minute fold and tiny ridge. The woman was a novel of infinite complexity and impossible detail, and Vito stood in front of her, reading without comprehending, understanding every scratch and curlicue, until his memory fell away from him and tumbled into the distance of her skin. She leaned forward, and kissed him lightly, then turned and went up into the house.

Vast Mister Green was the first person to call upon Vito's services in the days that followed. He was a mobsters' mobster, a bearded, gun-toting control freak so gapingly overweight that no one could bring him to trial without a structural engineer. He had been stabbed 32 times by a business associate who must have been a congenital optimist, since stabbing Vast Mister Green was utterly futile without a survey map to locate his organs. Vito's hands danced over Green like a brace of hummingbirds

on amphetamines, trailing stitching cord and disinfectant swabs. He spliced and sutured with his usual aplomb,

until it occurred to him that Vast Mister Green's stomach and chest looked rather bare. True, he had been forced to shave the patient, but all the same, Green looked... blank. And the pattern of stab wounds suggested irresistibly a scene which came, from nowhere, into his searching mind. To his sewing and clamping, he added just a soupçon of illustration.

Like the day when the warranty expires on every single household appliance, and each one develops a harmless but nagging quirk, so Vito's illustrative efforts were all revealed at once. Vast Mister Green, removing his bandages, discovered himself to be the proud canvas for a depiction of Custer's Last Stand, the good Colonel himself wielding a banner whose point indicated Green's most intimate region. Eponymous Jack had the shooter's face drawn in broad sweeps around a picturesque bullet wound on his arm, and Honourable Allison, after a fall from a third-story window, was covered in a representation of her sexual history so accurate that several political parties clubbed together to pay her ticket to Delaware.

Vito had no recollection of himself, but memory in general had become his passion. Not one patient passed through his excellent care but was left with some *memento mori*. The history of the world is written in scar tissue and tattooing ink on the bodies of the people of Throat. There was some talk of attending with generous mayhem to this artistic streak, but Vito's combat surgery was still of the highest quality, and it remained that his pressure bandages were the best in town. Vito was adopted instead, by a city which is to cultural diversity what piranha are to steak tartare. Death is commonplace in Throat, and there are too many days when you may need a doctor's sympathetic hands to worry about a little surgical graffiti.

Nick Cornwell wrote the above story as a sequel, in a very loose sense, to his debut piece "Love on 5th and Turquoise" (IZ 123). On that last occasion, we said of him: "he is 24, lives in London, and grew up reading Damon Runyon and laughing at Charles Addams's cartoons." Latterly he has been busy writing film scripts, although he has also (he tells us) been working on a serious science-fiction story. His aunt, of like surname, is a well-known actress who has written several novels.

Onward Station

Eric Brown

The winter of the year 2008 was the coldest in living memory, and December saw a record snowfall across the north of England. On the first Monday of the month I sat in the warmth of the staff-room and gazed out across the snow-sealed moorland, my mind completely blank. Miller, Head of Maths, dropped himself into the opposite seat, effectively blocking my view. He lit up nervously and stared at me.

"Jeffrey," he said. "You take year 13 for Film Studies, don't you?"

"For my sins."

"What do you make of the Hainault girl?"

"I was away last week when she started," I said. "Snowed in, remember?"

"Oh, of course. Well, you take them today, don't you?"

"Last period. Why?"

He had the annoying habit of tapping the implant at his temple with a nicotine-stained finger, producing an insistent, hollow beat.

"Just wondered what you'd make of her, that's all."

"The Hainault girl?" He grunted a laugh. "Quite the contrary. Brilliant pupil. Educated privately in France before arriving here. She's wasted at this dump. It's just..."

"Yes?"

He hesitated. "You'll see when you take the class," he said, and stubbed out his cigarette.

I watched, puzzled, as he stood and shuffled from the room.

*...all the time
in the universe...*

"Tomlinson, Wilkins – if you want to turn out for the school team on Wednesday, shut it now. Or if you'd prefer detention..."

Silence from the usually logorrhoeic double act. I stared around the class, challenging.

"Thank you. Now, get into your study groups and switch on the screens. If you recall..." I glanced at my notes, "last week we were examining the final scenes of *Brighton Rock*. I want you to watch the last 15 minutes, then we'll talk."

I glanced around the room. "Claudine Hainault?"

The new girl was sitting alone at the back of the class, already tapping into her computer. She looked up when I called her name, tossed a strand of hair from her eyes, and smiled.

She was blonde and slim, almost impossibly pretty. She appeared older than her 18 years, something about her poise and confidence giving her a sophistication possessed by none of her classmates.

I moved to her desk and knelt. "Claudine, I'll run through what's happened so far, then leave you to it."

"It is okay, Mr Morrow." She spoke precisely, with a slight accent. "I know the film."

Only then did I notice that she was not implanted.

I returned to my desk, sat down and willed myself not to stare at the girl.

Somehow, the lesson progressed. Once, when I sensed that she was not looking, I glanced over at Claudine Hainault. The skin of her right temple was smooth, without the square, raised outline of the implant device. She was the first person I had ever seen, since the process began, who was not implanted.

With five minutes to go before the bell, a boy looked up from the screen. He shook his head. "But Mr Morrow... he died. And this was before... before the implants. How did people live back then without going mad?"

I felt a tightness in my throat. "It was only five years ago," I managed. "You'll learn all about that in Cultural Studies."

The class went silent. They were all staring at Claudine Hainault. To her credit, she affected an interest in the screen before her.

Then the bell shattered the silence and all was forgotten in the mad scramble to be the first to quit the classroom.

At four I followed the school bus as it crawled along the gritted lane between snow-drifted hedges. I lived in a converted farm-house five miles from the school, and Claudine Hainault, I discovered with a pang of some emotion I could not quite define, was my neighbour – our houses separated by the grim, slate-grey expanse of the reservoir.

The bus braked and the girl climbed down and walked along the track towards an isolated farm-house, a tiny figure in a cold and inhospitable landscape. I watched her until she disappeared from sight, then I re-started the engine and drove home.

I pulled into the driveway minutes later, unlocked the front door and stepped into a freezing house. The framed photographs of Caroline glimmered, indiscernible, in the twilight. I turned on the lights and the heating, microwaved an instant meal and ate in the lounge while listening to the radio news. I washed it down with a bottle of good claret – but even the wine

made me think of the Hainault girl.

For a long time I sat and stared out through the picture window. The Onward Station was situated only a mile away, a breathtaking edifice of towering crystal, scintillating in the moonlight like a confection of spun ice. Tonight it illuminated the landscape and my lounge, a monument to the immortality of humankind, and a tragic epitaph to all those who had suffered and died before its erection.



The following Friday at first break, Miller approached me in the staff-room. "So what do you make of the Hainault girl, Jeff?"

I shrugged. "She's very able," I said non-committally.

"I'm worried about her. She seems withdrawn... depressed. She doesn't mix, you know. She has no friends." He tapped the implant at his temple. "I was wondering... you're good at drawing the kids out. Have a word with her, would you? See if anything's troubling her."

He was too absorbed in re-lighting his cigarette to notice my stare. *Troubling her?* I wanted to ask; the poor girl isn't implanted – what do you think is troubling her?

I had spent the week doing my best not to think about Claudine Hainault, an effort that proved futile. I could not help but notice her every time I took year 13; how she always sat alone, absorbed in her work; how she never volunteered to answer questions, though I knew full well from the standard of her written work that she had the answers; how, from time to time, she would catch my eye and smile. Her smile, at these times, seemed at odds with her general air of sadness.

At lunch-time I was staring out of the staff-room window when I noticed a knot of kids gathered in the corner of the school-yard. There were about six of them, confronting a single girl.

I rushed out and crossed the tarmac. The group, mainly girls, was taunting Claudine. She faced them, swearing in French.

"That's quite enough!" I called. "Okay, break it up." I sent the ring-leaders off to visit the head-teacher and told the others to scarper.

"But we were just telling Claudine that she's going to die!" one of the girls said in parting.

When I turned to Claudine she had her back to me and was staring through the railings at the distant speck of the Onward Station.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded, not looking at me. Her long blonde hair fell to the small of her back, swept cleanly behind her ears, and her expression seemed carved from ice, imbued with fortitude.

That afternoon I remained at school an extra hour, catching up on some marking I had no desire to take home. It was dark when I set off, but at least I wasn't trapped behind the school bus, and the lanes were free of traffic. A couple of miles from school, my headlights picked out a quick, striding figure, silhouetted against the snow. I slowed down and braked, reached over and opened the passenger door.

She bent her knees and peered in at me.

"Claudine," I said. "What on earth are you doing

walking home? Do you realize how far...?"

"Oh, Mr Morrow," she said. "I missed the bus."

"Hop in. I'll take you home."

She climbed in and stared ahead, her small face red with cold, diadems of deliquescent snow spangling her hair.

"Were you kept back?" I asked.

"I was using the bathroom."

I didn't believe her. She had missed the bus on purpose, to avoid her class-mates.

We continued in silence for a while. I felt an almost desperate need to break the ice, establish contact and gain her confidence. I cleared my throat.

"What brought you to England?" I asked at last.

"My mother, she is English," she said, as if that was answer enough.

"Does your father work here?"

She shook her head minimally, staring straight ahead.

I concentrated on the road, steering around the icy bends. "Couldn't you have rung you mother to come for you?" I said. "She does drive?" Private transport was a necessity this far out.

"My mother, she is an alcoholic, Mr Morrow," she said with candour. "She doesn't do anything."

"Oh. I'm sorry." I felt myself blushing. "Look," I said, my mouth dry, "if you don't want to catch the bus in future, I'll drive you home, okay?"

She turned and smiled at me, a smile of complicity and gratitude.

I was aware of the pounding of my heart, as if I had taken the first irrevocable step towards founding a relationship I knew to be foolhardy but which I was powerless to prevent.



I looked forward to our short time together in the warmth of my car at the end of every school-day. I probed Claudine about her life in France, wanting to know, of course, why she was not implanted. But with an adroitness unusual in one so young, she turned around my questions and interrogated me. I found myself, more often than not, talking about my own past.

At one point I managed to steer the conversation away from me. "I've been impressed with the standard of your work," I said, hating myself for sounding so didactic. "Your grades are good. What do you plan to study at university?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Oh, I thought perhaps philosophy. I'm interested in Nietzsche, Cioran."

I glanced at her. "You are?"

She smiled. "Why not?" she replied. "They seem to have all the answers, I think."

"Do they?" I said, surprised. "I would have thought that a young girl like you..."

We came to a halt at the end of the track leading to her house, and the sudden silence was startling. She stared at me. I could see that she had half a mind to tell me not to be so patronizing. Instead she shook her head.

"Life is awful, Mr Morrow," she said. "It always has been. And it hasn't improved since *they* arrived. If anything, it's made things even worse."

Tentatively, I reached out and took her hand. I won-

dered for a second if I had misjudged the situation completely; if she would react with indignation and fright, or even report me.

"If there's anything I can do to help..." I said. Did she realize, in her teenage wisdom, that my words were just as much a cry for help as an offer of the same?

She smiled brightly, filling me with relief. "Thanks, Mr Morrow. It's nice to be able to talk to someone." She climbed out and waved to me before setting off down the farm-track.

That night I set out to get seriously drunk. I placed three bottles of claret on the coffee table before the fire and sat in the darkness and drank. I would be lying if I claimed that I was trying to banish the painful memories of Caroline that Claudine stirred in me. More truthfully, I wanted to banish the knowledge of the failure I had become through inaction and fear. A lonely man has the capacity for self-pity so much greater than his ability, or desire, to change the circumstances which brought about such self-pity in the first place.

I was drinking because I realized the futility of trying to seek solace and companionship from a mixed-up 18-year-old schoolgirl.



I awoke late the following day, lost myself in a book for a couple of hours, and later that afternoon watched the live match on television. Leeds had a returnee playing up front, but after the year's lay-off he had yet to find his previous form, and the game ended in a dull nil-nil draw. At six, as a new snowfall created a pointillistic flurry in the darkness outside, I started on the half-bottle of claret remaining from the night before.

I was contemplating another drunken evening when I heard a call from outside, and seconds later a frenzied banging on the front door.

Claudine stood on the doorstep, wet, bedraggled and frozen. She began as soon as I pulled open the door, "She has fallen and hit her head. The lines are down and I can't call the ambulance."

"Slow down," I said, taking her hand and pulling her across the threshold. "Who's fallen?"

"My mother. She was drinking. She fell down the stairs. She's unconscious."

She was wearing a thin anorak, a short skirt and incongruously bulky boots. Her legs were bare and whipped red from the frozen wind.

"I've a mobile somewhere." I hurried into the lounge, dug through the cushions of the settee for the phone, and called an ambulance.

Claudine watched me, teeth chattering. With her hair plastered to her forehead, and her bare knees knocking, she looked about twelve years old.

I took her hand, hurried her from the house to my car. She sat in silence as I drove past the reservoir and turned down the track to her house.

She had left the front door wide open in her haste to summon help. I rushed inside. "In the lounge," Claudine said. "Through there."

The lounge was a split-level affair, with three steps leading from the higher level to a spacious area with a picture window overlooking the water. Claudine's mother was sprawled across the floor, having tumbled

and struck her head on the edge of a wrought-iron coffee table. She was a thin, tanned woman with bleached-blond hair. In her unconscious features I saw the likeness of Claudine, 30 years on.

The reek of whisky, spilt from the glass she had been carrying, filled the room.

I rolled her onto her side and did my best to staunch the flow of blood from her forehead, noticing as I did so that she, unlike her daughter, was implanted.

The ambulance arrived 15 minutes later. The paramedics examined Mme Hainault and pronounced severe concussion. I watched them load her into the back of the vehicle, my arm around Claudine. One of the medics asked Claudine if she wanted to accompany her mother in the ambulance.

"I'll take her in the car," I said before she had time to reply.

The ambulance backed up the track and raced, blue light flashing, down the lane into town. I made for the car. Behind me, Claudine said, "I don't want to go."

"What?"

She stood, pathetic and frozen, in the snow. She shook her head. "I don't want to go to the hospital. I'll stay here."

"On your own?"

She gave an apathetic shrug.

"Look... there's a spare room at my place. You can stay there until your mother's released, okay?"

She stared at me through the falling snow, her teeth chattering. "Are you sure?"

"Go get some clothes and things. And lock the door. I'll be waiting here."

I climbed into the car and watched as the lights in the house went out one by one. Claudine appeared at the front door, carrying a hold-all and fumbling with the door-key. She climbed into the passenger seat and I set off up the track, turned right and continued along the lane until we reached my place.

I showed Claudine to the bathroom, and while she showered and changed I prepared a simple pasta dish. I had experienced a rush of adrenalin while attending to her mother and waiting for the ambulance, and I realized that something of the anxiety was with me still. My hands were shaking as I set two places at the table. I went over and over what I would say during dinner.

I was wondering what was taking her so long when I heard a voice from the lounge. "This is really a beautiful place." There was a note of surprise in her voice, as if she thought that the domicile of a washed up 40-year-old teacher would prove to be an inhospitable dump.

I crossed the kitchen and stood in the doorway, watching her as she moved around the lounge. She was barefoot, dressed in flared jeans that were back in fashion, and a white tee-shirt that had either shrunk in the wash or was designed to reveal a strip of slim stomach.

She paused before the photographs of Caroline on the wall. She looked at me.

"My wife," I said.

She said, casually, "I didn't know you were married."

"I'm not," I said. "Any longer. She died in a car accident five years ago."

She winced, ever so slightly. "Before *they* came?" she asked.

"Just one month before," I said.

I joined her and stared at the photograph. Caroline smiled out at me. "She looked like a lovely person," Claudine said.

I nodded. "She was."

As if she feared that the subject might move us on to the reason why she was not implanted, Claudine drifted across the room to inspect the bookshelves.

I returned to the kitchen and served dinner.

We chatted as we ate, going over things we'd talked about before, school, local attractions, novels and films we admired.

"You can phone the hospital later," I said at one point. "I'll drive you over tomorrow if you like."

She shook her head, not meeting my gaze. "It doesn't matter. I'm not that bothered. She'll come back when she's better."

I paused. "What happened between you two?" I asked at last.

She smiled up at me. She was so pretty when she smiled; then again, she had a certain, sullen *hauteur* that was equally as attractive when she deigned not to smile.

"Oh, we have never got on," she said. "I was always my father's favourite. I think she was jealous. They fought a lot – it might have been because of me. I don't know."

"Are they separated?"

Claudine looked at me with her over-sized brown eyes. She shook her head. "You might have heard of him – Bertrand Hainault. He was a philosopher, one of those popular media intellectuals you don't have over here, I think."

I shook my head. "Sorry. Not up on philosophy."

"My father took his life two years ago," she said quietly. "He and mother were fighting constantly, but I think it was more than that... I don't know. It was all so confusing. I think it might have been a protest, too – a protest at what *they* were doing."

Something caught in my throat. "He wasn't implanted?"

"Oh, no. He was opposed to the whole process. He argued his position in televised debates and in a series of books, but of course no one took any notice."

Except you, I thought, beginning at last to understand the enigma that was Claudine Hainault.

She changed the subject, suddenly brightening. "I'll help you with the dishes, then can we watch a video?"

Later we sat on the settee, drank wine and watched a classic Truffaut. Claudine curled up beside me, whispering comments on the film to herself. She fell asleep leaning against me, and I watched the remainder of the movie accompanied by the sound of her breathing and the pleasant weight of her shampooed head against my shoulder.

Rather than wake her, at midnight I carefully lowered her to the cushions and covered her with a blanket. In the pulsing blue light from the tv, I sat for a while and watched her sleeping.



In the morning I was woken by the unfamiliar sound of someone moving about the house. Then the aroma of a cooked breakfast eddied up the stairs. I had a quick shower and joined Claudine in the kitchen. She was sliding fried eggs and bacon onto plates. The coffee percolator bubbled on the work-bench. She could hardly bring herself to meet my eyes, as if fearing that I might

consider this rite of domesticity an unwelcome escalation of the intimacy we had shared the night before.

Over breakfast, I suggested that we go for a long walk across the moors. It was a dazzling winter's morning, the sky blue and the snow an unblemished mantle as far as the eye could see.

I drove Claudine back to her house to change into walking boots and a thick coat. We left the car at my place and set off along the bright, metalled lane. Later we left the road and struck off across the moors, following a bridle-way that would take us, eventually, to the escarpment overlooking the valley, the reservoir and the scattering of farm-houses.

Somewhere along the way her mittened hand found my cold fingers and squeezed. She was smiling as I exaggerated the misfortunes of the school football team, which I organized. I never would have thought that I could be so cheered by something as simple as her smile.

Claudine looked up, ahead, and her expression changed. I followed the line of her gaze and saw the sparkling pinnacle of the Onward Station projecting above the crest of the hill.

Her mouth was open in wonder. "God... This is the closest I've seen it. I never realized it was so beautiful."

She pulled me along, up the incline. As we climbed, more and more of the Station was revealed in the valley below. At last we stood on the lip of the escarpment, staring. My attention was divided equally between the alien edifice and Claudine. She gazed down with wide eyes, her nose and cheeks red with the cold, her thoughts unguessable.

It was not so much the architecture of the Station that struck the onlooker, as the material from which it was made. The Station – identical to the thousands of others situated around the world – rose from the snow-covered ground like a cathedral spun from glass, climbing to a spire that scintillated in the bright winter sunlight.

I put my arm around Claudine's shoulders. She said, "The very fact of the Station is like the idea it promotes."

I made some interrogational noise.

"Beguiling," she said. "It is like some Christmas bauble that dazzles children, I think."

"For ages humankind has dreamed of becoming immortal," I said, staring at her. "Thanks to the Kéthani..."

She laid her head against my arm, almost sadly. "But," she said, gesturing with a mittened hand in a bid to articulate her objection. "But don't you see, Jeff, that it really doesn't *matter*? Whether we live 70 years, or 7,000 – it's still the same old futile repetition of day-to-day existence."

Anger slow-burned within me. "Futile? What about our ability to learn, to experience, to discover new and wondrous things out there?"

She was shaking her head. "It is merely repetition, Jeff – a going through the motions. We've done all these things on Earth, and so what? Are we any happier as a race?"

"But I think we are," I said. "Now that the spectre of death is banished –" I stopped myself.

Claudine just shook her head.

Into the silence, I said, "I honestly don't understand why you aren't implanted."

She looked up at me, so young and vulnerable. "I'll tell you why, Jeff. I've read the philosophical works of the

Kéthani and the other races out there – or at least read summaries of them. My father and I... in the early days we went through them all. And do you know what?"

I shook my head, suddenly weary. "No. What? Tell me."

She smiled up at me, but her eyes were terrified. "They understand everything, and have come to the realization that the universe and life in it is just one vast mechanistic carousel. It doesn't *mean* anything –"

"Claudine, Claudine. Of course it doesn't. But we must live with that. There never were any answers, unless you were religious. But you must make your own meaning. We have so much time ahead of us to live for the day, to love –"

She laughed. "Do you know something? I don't believe in love, very much. I saw my parent's relationship deteriorate, turn to hate. I can feel it –" she looked at me "–but I can't believe that it will last."

"It changes," I began, then fell silent.

She squeezed my hand. "Let's go home," she said. "I'm hungry. I'll prepare lunch, okay?"

We set off down the hillside, passing the Station. A ferryman driving a Range Rover pulled into the car park, delivering another "dead" citizen. Tonight, the darkness would pulse with white light as the bodies were transported to the Kéthani mothership in orbit high above.

After lunch that afternoon we lounged before the roaring fire and talked. When the words ran out it seemed entirely natural, an action of no consequence to the outside world, but important only to ourselves, that we should seek each other with touches and kisses, coming in silence to some mutual understanding of our needs.

That night, as we lay close in bed, we stared through the window at the constellations. The higher-magnitude stars burned in the freezing night sky, while beyond them the sweep of the Milky Way was a hazy opaline blur.

"Hard to believe there are hundreds of thousands of humans out there," she said, close to sleep.

I thought of the new planets, the strange civilizations, that I would some day encounter – and I experienced a sudden surge of panic at the fact that Claudine was willingly foregoing the opportunity to do the same. I wanted to shake her in my sudden rage and demand that she undergo the implantation process.

It was a long while before I slept.



The following day an ambulance brought Claudine's mother home, and I drove her over to the farm-house. She kissed me before climbing from the car, suddenly solemn. "See you at school," she said, and was gone.

Suddenly, the routine of school seemed no longer a burden. I could put up with the recalcitrance of ignorant teenagers and the petty in-fighting between members of staff. The sight of Claudine in the school-yard, or seated at her desk, filled me with rapture. Her swift, knowing smile during lessons was an injection of some effervescent and exhilarating drug.

After school I would pull off the road, up some lonely and abandoned cart-track, and we would make love in the little time we had before I dropped her off at home. She told me that she would spend the following weekend at my place – she'd tell her mother that she was staying with a friend – and the days till then seemed

never-ending.

On the Friday, just as I was about to leave the building, Miller buttonholed me in the corridor. "What the hell's going on, Jeffrey?"

My heart hammered. "What do you mean?"

"Between you and the Hainault girl, for Chrissake. It's glaringly obvious. They way you look at each other... You're a changed man."

"There's nothing *going on*," I began.

"Look," he said. He paused, as if unsure whether to go on. "Someone saw you with her yesterday – in your car on the moors." He shook his head. "This can't continue, Jeffrey. It's got to stop –"

I didn't let him finish. I pushed past him and hurried out and across to the car park. Claudine was standing by the bus stop on the main road, and as I let her in she gave me a dazzling smile that banished the threat of Miller's words and the consequences if I ignored them.



On the Saturday night we lay in bed and talked, and I told her what Miller had said to me.

"It doesn't matter," she whispered in return. "They can't do anything. We'll be more careful in future, I think. Now forget about bloody Miller."

We went for a long walk on the Sunday afternoon, avoiding the Station as if mutually fearing the argument it might provoke. Claudine was quiet, withdrawn, as if Miller's knowledge was troubling her.

She wept quietly after we made love that night. I held her. "Claudine – I've decided to resign, quit school. I'll find a job in town. There's plenty of work about. You can move in here, okay?" I babbled on, a love-struck teenager promising the world.

She was silent for a time. At last she whispered, "It wouldn't work."

Something turned in my stomach. "What?" I said.

"Love doesn't last," she said quietly. "It would be fine at first, and then..."

At that moment the room was washed in a blinding beam of light as the dead were beamed from the Onward Station to the Kéthani starship. I was appalled at what I saw in the sudden illumination. Claudine's eyes were raw from crying, her face distorted in a silent grimace of anguish.

"Like everything," she sobbed, "it would corrupt."

I held her to me, unable to respond, unable to find the words that might convince her otherwise.

At last I said, "But I can still see you?" in desperation.

She smiled through her tears and nodded; touched, perhaps, by my naive hope and inexperience.

In the early hours she slipped from the bed and kissed me softly on the cheek, before dressing and hurrying home.



Next day at school I desperately sought from Claudine some sign that I had not spoiled our relationship with my demands of the night before. In class, she smiled at me with forced brightness, a smile that disguised a freight of sadness and regret.

We had agreed that I would no longer drive her

home, to scotch the rumours flying about the school, and that evening her absence during the journey was painful. I looked ahead to the weekend when we would be together, and the days seemed endless.

On Tuesday Claudine was not at school. I assumed that she had slept in and missed the bus.

During the first period I saw the police car pull into the school grounds, but thought nothing of it.

Fifteen minutes later the secretary tapped on the classroom door and entered. I should have guessed that something was amiss by the way she averted her gaze as she handed me the note – but what seems obvious in retrospect is never apparent at the time. The Head had called a meeting in the staff-room at first break.

When the bell went I crossed the hall to the staff-room. I recall very well what I was thinking as I pushed open the door. My thoughts were full of Claudine, of course. The next time I saw her in private, I would plead with her to live with me once I had resigned my post at the school: to her claim that love never lasted I would counter that at least we should give it a try.

The staff-room was crowded with ashen-faced teachers, and a dread silence hung in the air. Miller made his way to my side, his expression stricken.

"What?" I began, my stomach turning.

The Head cleared his throat and began to speak, and I heard only fragments of what he said.

"Claudine Hainault..."

"Tragic accident... her body was found in the reservoir..."

I felt myself removed from proceedings, abstracted through shock from the terrible reality unfolding around me.

Teachers began to weep. Miller gripped my arm, guided me to the nearest chair.

"The police think she slipped... went under... It was so cold she was paralysed and couldn't get out..."

I wanted to scream at the injustice, but all I could do was weep.

"Such a terrible tragedy..." The head paused and stared around the room. "As you know, she refused to be implanted."



I made myself attend the funeral.

I drank half a bottle of whisky before leaving the house, and somehow survived the service. It brought back memories of another funeral, five years ago. Claudine was buried in the village churchyard, just three graves along from Caroline, beneath a stand of cherry trees which would flower with the coming of spring.

A television crew was present, along with reporters and photographers from the national press. So few people really died these days, and Caroline's being young and attractive made the story even more sensational. Relatives flew in from France. Her mother was an inconsolable wreck. I tried to ignore Miller and his begrudging words of commiseration; his attitude was consoling and at the same time censorious, unable to condone my love for Claudine.

I watched the coffin being lowered into the black maw of the grave, unable to accept that Claudine was within it. Then I slipped quickly away and walked to

the reservoir where Claudine had lost her life. A pathetic spread of wind-blown flowers marked the spot on the bank where she had fallen, left by pupils and stricken locals.

That night I wrote a letter of resignation to the school authorities. It would be impossible to go back to the place where I had first met Claudine, to the classrooms haunted by her absence. I considered selling the house and moving from the area. Claudine still seemed present, as if she might at any second emerge from another room, smiling at me.

That night I drank myself unconscious.

In the morning, waking from oblivion to face the terrible fact of her death anew, I dressed and made my way downstairs and saw the letter lying on the doormat.

My name and address was in Claudine's precise schoolgirl hand.

With trembling fingers I ripped open the envelope, pulled out the single folded sheet and read.

I sank to the floor, disbelieving. I moaned with grief intensified, made more painful than I ever imagined possible.

I read her note a second time, then again and again, as if by doing so I might change what she had written, and what it meant.

My Dear Jeff, she began, and continued with words I would never forget, *I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry – but I can't go on. I love you, but it can't last, nothing lasts. I've known joy with you and perhaps it is best to end that joy at its height, rather than have it spoil.* And I wanted to cry, no! I wanted the chance to vent my anger and tell her how very wrong she was.

You know I don't want immortality. Life is so very hard to bear at the best of times. To face life ever-lasting... I feel at peace when I contemplate what I'm going to do – please try to understand. She was going to leave her house – had left her house – and walk to the reservoir, and give herself to the frigid embrace of the water... How could I understand *that*? How could I understand an act so irrational, an act of violence pro-

voked by fears and pressures known only to herself? How often since have I wished I had known her better, had been a lover capable of being there when she needed me most?

I can hear you asking how could I do this to you. But, Jeff, you will survive – you have all the time in the universe. In a hundred years I will be a fleeting memory, and in a thousand...

They say that time heals all wounds.

And she had finished, *With all my love, Claudine.*



I spend a long time contemplating the events of the past, going over my time with Claudine and wondering where I went wrong. I blame myself, of course, for not persuading her to undergo the implantation process; for not being able to show her how much I loved her. I blame myself for not giving her reason enough to go on living.

I am haunted by her words, *You have all the time in the universe...*

At night I sit in the darkened lounge and stare out at the rearing edifice of the Onward Station, marvelling at its beauty and contemplating the terrible gift of the Kéthani.

Eric Brown last appeared here with "Vulpheous" (issue 129). He has three new books due out in the Spring of 1999: the adult sf novel *Penumbra* (Orion); the children's sf novel in the shared-world "Web" series, *Walkabout* (Orion); and a small-press collection of short stories co-written with Keith Brooke, *Parallax View* (Tanjen), which will include their three collaborations published in *Interzone* (issues 109, 112 and 126) together with a couple of originals. Eric has also adapted Steve Baxter's IZ story "George and the Comet" as "George and the Red Giant" for the Seeing Ear Theatre in New York: it should be available on the Internet shortly.

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All it takes is a little imagination!

One of science fiction's virtues is its ability to produce hybrid forms of generic (and non-generic) fiction, and such is Steven Gould's *Helm* (Tor, \$24.95). Technically it's a planetary romance, but it offers aspects of the historical novel, the *Bildungsroman* and two separate novels of process.

It's set on Agatsu in the Epsilon Eridani system, which has been settled as an act of desperation, Earth having been rendered (at least temporarily) uninhabitable by war, with just a few thousand human survivors stranded on the Moon. Agatsu wasn't inhabitable either, but a suspiciously rapid and efficient process of terraforming (lovingly described) has made it so well before the novel properly opens. The colony has prospered over some four centuries but failed to remain united, resulting in a combination of high culture and endemic, low-key warfare reminiscent of classical Greece or 15th-century Italy. Culture would doubtless have regressed yet further but for the "imprinters" used on the original colonists (with flagrant disregard for their human rights) to impose on them universal and permanent biases in favour of literacy and hygiene (and what schoolteacher worth the name wouldn't kill for one of those?)

Love of literacy and a large stock of more-or-less indestructible books have prevented collapse, but the resultant culture is technically unconvincing. Lack of firearms is improbably ascribed to a cultural bias, and the fastest means of communication is the heliograph, though we are told they have batteries quite powerful enough for spark-gap radios. To create a wholly consistent culture of this kind isn't easy, but the cracks shouldn't glare quite so wide, especially as this sort of setup has been used often enough before, most notably by Jack Vance and Poul Anderson.

It's a pity, as Gould handles the non-technical aspects well, for all that some of his characters are rather extreme. Most extreme of all is juvenile lead Leland de Laal, youngest son of a major nobleman. We first meet him aged 17 and engaged in an extremely hazardous piece of rock-climbing which brings him to the Helm of the title, the last surviving imprinter. Naturally, he puts it on, and receives from it a secondary personality well stocked with memories of his own, most notably of having been seriously good at aikido.

Presumably because he knows of this effect, Leland's father inflicts upon Leland a punishment of exceptional cruelty: not only must he drudge for half a year, his own brothers will subject him to daily, random attacks with heavy canes throughout that period. Leland can try hiding or running, but in truth only dodging is any good. Only after he has survived

Hybrids

Chris Gilmore

unbroken in body or spirit is he sent away for training – in aikido, of course. *En passant* he meets Marilyn, the leading lady, who is Pledged to Another, so we're well away on a fine romance.

With so much going on it's perforce a rather slow-moving romance, but that doesn't matter. I lack the background to get the most out of the aikido-training passages, but you can't please everyone all the time, and Steve Barnes will love them; meanwhile the other aspects sustain interest, the secondary characters are broadly but vigorously drawn, and suspense is maintained by a burgeoning conspiracy against Leland's father. He's a believer in minimal government, low, uniform taxes and

open borders, which naturally excites the disapproval of his neighbours (including Marilyn's father), who favour high and progressive taxes to finance military adventurism and their own vainglory.

Can Leland discover the plot, convince his father of it, foil it and somehow do so without alienating the fair Marilyn? Has the human race died out in the Solar System? Who was the secondary personality downloaded from the Helm? This is a good page-turner, but Gould gets well out of his depth at times. In particular, he resolves the love interest in a manner which seems to sacrifice the happiness of both parties, bitterly and without hope of comfort, for the Greater Good. Strong stuff, if you can carry it off; John Collier played it for a very grim laugh in "The Chaser" and Damon Knight brought off something yet more grievous in *A for Anything*, for instance. But having set it up, Gould recoils from it, pretending everything in the garden is still lovely – a sad cop-out.

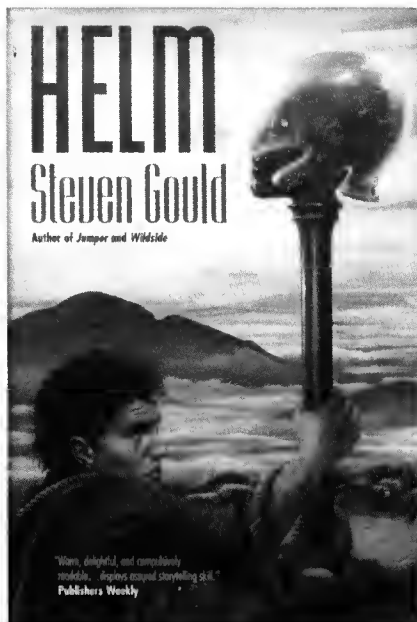
With a bit more thought this might have been a very good traditional entertainment; with a bit more nerve it might have ended on a note of tragic grandeur. As it is, this last blemish is just too huge and avoidable to forgive. Next time, maybe?

One thing no one ever forgets is the manner in which he/she parted with his/her virginity. How is it, therefore, that "recovered-memory" merchants are able to implant convincing recollections of having been deflowered by papa at seven in a girl who knows perfectly well that she was first seduced at 17 by the boy next door, and didn't the blood gush? There's at least one well documented case of a girl who swore blind

BOOKS



REVIEWED



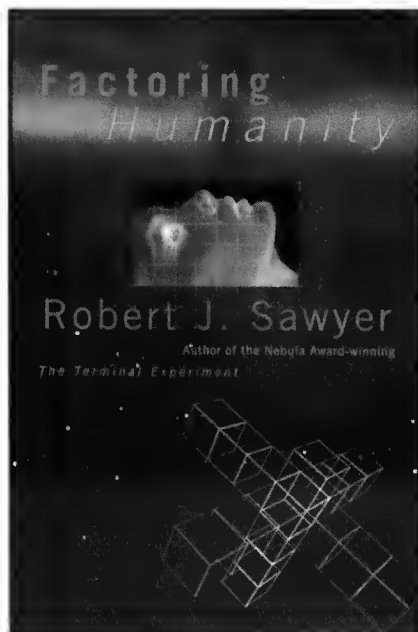
she'd been comprehensively raped against the testimony of her own unbroken hymen.

That's the question which lies at the heart of Robert J. Sawyer's *Factoring Humanity* (Tor, \$23.99), another hybrid. It deserves a serious answer, but no such luck. Professor Kyle Graves knows damn well he has never molested either of his daughters, yet one has already committed suicide and the other has just remembered all about it – both courtesy of a therapist who believes that incest lies at the root of every human ill from indigestion to insomnia by way of eczema. In a mainstream novel the problem would be obvious: how do you get the therapist's licence permanently revoked without being branded an incestuous paedophile in the process? A problem much exacerbated by being set in Toronto, a city which (according to Sawyer) strives to outdo all the worst excesses of Californian PC.

This being sf, however, Kyle has other problems. He has what would be called "doubts" in a religious context, in his case about the validity of quantum theory, and is seeking refuge in the multi-universe model. The trouble with that is, it implies that every fulfillable condition *must* have been fulfilled somewhere in 5D spacetime: thus, since to creep into his daughters' bedroom with lewd intent may outrage the laws of God and Man but not those of Nature, he (or an analogue) must, in some context, have done it; so if his daughters' recollections relate to a worldline different from but no less valid than his own, he is both innocent and guilty, as everyone is innocent and guilty of everything of which they have ever been physically capable. There is no morality, since free will is as meaningless in the context of a random walk as it is on the iron road of the determinists.

This class of problem has been dealt with before, notably by Greg Egan and Stanislaw Lem, but their approach is essentially light-hearted. Whatever intellectual conclusions they draw, we and they can and do go on living by our gut-belief in the continuity of the past, the reality of the present and the indeterminacy of the future – and what's more, we brand as schizophrenic anyone who lives otherwise. Sawyer, and therefore Kyle, plays it straight – not only is he involved in a promising AI program, he's attempting to build a quantum computer which will work by operating simultaneously in more parallel universes than this universe has atoms. What a man!

As if this were not enough, his semi-estranged wife Heather is involved in analysis of a long series of enigmatic digital messages apparently emanating from Alpha Centauri – and the series has just



stopped. No one has ever been able to understand what any of the messages relate to – except for the first 11, which were obvious to all. Now Heather, by an intuitive leap, susses them out and builds the dingus for which they provide the specs. It's the most implausible device I've encountered in fiction since Theodore Sturgeon's cardboard perpetual motion machine, and – Guess what! It's just what she needs to check if Kyle ever did molest his daughters. What a woman! What a family! What luck!

Oh yes, almost forgot; a former boyfriend of Heather's got a message from Epsilon Eridani years ago. He promptly encrypted it and killed himself. Now, what he wanna go do a t'ing like dat for? Coincidences on such an epic scale render this book quite impossible to take seriously. I kept turning the pages out of purely professional interest: Sawyer writes in the manner of one who doesn't intend to be caught with any loose ends floating, and I was curious to see what ingenious perversities of development he would use to tie them all off.

I was not, in a manner of speaking, disappointed. I've encountered plenty of unpleasant inventions in sf, but never more gratefully have I been thoroughly unconvinced. Heather's dingus just happens to realize the morbid delusion that was the most distressing feature of Newton's madness, and Sawyer reckons it's a great idea. To live in anyone else's Utopia must surely be anyone's Hell, but Sawyer's is a lot more hellish than most.

Fantasy has the very obvious advantage that one can adopt any period of history, romanticize it shamelessly, and use it for a backdrop. A feeling for atmosphere and

context is useful, but no great scholarship is required as no historical accuracy is claimed. To those who dislike fantasy, that is another way of saying it's a meretricious genre. Liking fantasy I shrug, and note that Midori Snyder's *The Innamorati* (Tor, \$23.95) is set in a version of Renaissance Venice c. 1540, where various sorts of magic are known but hardly widespread, and unified by the symbolism of the *Commedia del' Arte*.

Near this Venice lies a *Labirinto*, a maze into which it is occasionally possible to venture but is not so easily left, wherein (it is said) those who enter with pure intentions may shake off their hang-ups, or such other curses as may be vexing them. So of course, various people seek it out: Anna Forsetti, a mask-maker whose art has deserted her; Simonetta, a whore whose youth has flown; Fabrizio, a would-be actor horribly handicapped by a stutter; Erminia, a siren condemned to silence; Don Gianluca, a priest who has been false to his vocation; Rinaldo Giustiano, a swordsman too much in love with his sword; Lorenzo Falcomatta, a poet whose muse has deserted him; various others dragged in by their connections (and one dragged in literally by the heels).

As all these characters need developing the story takes some time to get going, but what Snyder lacks in pace she makes up in zest. Her people are never averse to break off for a spot of feasting, fighting, fornication or malfeasance and, in the tradition of the best bodice-rippers, they scold each other with imaginative obscenity when wrathful; but one by one they fall into the maze, which proves to be a realm of allegory where space and time vary according to no discernible rationale. There they continue to work out their destinies, sometimes jointly for a while but mainly alone; for as each lies under a different curse, each must thread his own path before they can meet at the centre. Once at the centre they must play their parts in the long awaited climax to the drama of the *Labirinto* and its creator. The ending, which includes a curse incarnate unmade by the power of love, is a tad sentimental in places but only slightly over the top.

It's all too easy to make a hash of this sort of thing, but Snyder avoids the trap of pretension, her jokes are broad but effective, and while character interaction is so sparse that the first two thirds read more like a set of picaresques interlinked by backdrop, she balances the stories so well that one never quite loses track. Consequently, when they do meet, the interaction (which involves much pairing-off) flows naturally from the personalities involved. One meets little allegory these days, and this ingenious, good-humoured book is a fine example.

It sometimes happens that a club which had once been very prestigious, with a long waiting-list and savage blackballs, falls on hard times and relaxes its entry requirements. Two sorts tend to join in response: cynics who know very well that if the place weren't on the skids they wouldn't be there, but nevertheless hope to get a little mileage out of those older members who recall the glory days; and nerdy types who think they've been wonderfully honoured – though not perhaps beyond their deserts. As regards the Church of England I'll let the experts specify an analogue of the first group, but whenever I see a priestess (or "woman priest" as they illiterately style themselves) I think of the second.

This prejudice gave me a slight problem with Phil Rickman's *The Wine of Angels* (MacMillan, £16.99) as Merrily Watkins, the unkindly named central character, is a youngish widow in a dog collar. Posted to the Herefordshire village of Ledwardine, she immediately finds herself embroiled in parish politics of Trollopian savagery. A 17th-century predecessor of hers had hanged himself in a nearby orchard rather than face investigation for diabolism, or sodomy, or perhaps a bit of both. Now a gay playwright has written a drama on the subject and wants to stage it in the church, starring his own boyfriend as the persecuted vicar. This sits ill with the squire, one of whose ancestors led the investigation, and no churchgoer can stand neutral in the battle.

Meanwhile Jane, Merrily's 15-year-old daughter, finds herself, if not torn at least stretched between two very dissimilar influences: Collette Cassidy, tarty daughter of a local restaurateur with a craving for excitement bordering on the deranged; and Lucy Devenish, eccentric quasi-pagan owner of the souvenir shop. Both these ladies offer Jane more interesting ways of manifesting teenage rebellion than the one she's thought of herself, which is first to espouse militant atheism, then to condemn her mother's habit of actually saying her prayers as next to public nose-picking on the grossness scale.

A third sub-plot concerns Lol Robinson, a wimpish minor pop star, now burnt out and retired to the village. His girlfriend promptly takes up with the squire, and now a seriously nasty fellow artiste from the old days has his own reasons for wanting him to make a comeback, and no scruples at all about how he puts the pressure on. Lol is Rickman's least effective character, being too much of a doormat to arouse sympathy and less than credible in his allotted role at the climax, but Rickman weaves this plotline into the fabric with his customary skill.

Well and good, but this book is sub-

titled "A ghost story," and we're past page 200 before the first ghost appears – and in a dream at that. Even more than his excellent *The Chalice* (reviewed in *Interzone* 122) this is really a mainstream novel with fantasy trimmings, but that could be no bad thing. Far too much fantasy is either crudely linear or based on simple parallel plotting, with very little impingement before the climax. As long as the writing's proficient I don't condemn either mode *per se*, but it's good to see someone try and succeed at something more complex. As before, this is very much a character-driven novel. Rickman's are excellently differentiated,

even though I recognized one from Robertson Davies's *Tempest Tossed* – a book of very similar structure, incidentally, by a writer who also liked to spice his work with a tang of fantasy.

Altogether, this is a superbly crafted novel in the English mainstream tradition. I invoked Murdoch and Spark last time and this time it's Trollope and Davies, but I stand by the lot – Rickman really is that good. My only complaint is that, though the sense of place is as fine as last time, it would still have benefited from a map. In time for the paperback, perhaps?

Chris Gilmore

Seeing is Believing

David Mathew

This month's books fall neatly and symmetrically into two groups, two in each. The second group's books are longer, and fantasies. The first group's books are short, with funny bits, and are (broadly speaking) science fiction. The second group contains books in which main characters must challenge their views on reality; but the first group contains books in which the reader must challenge his view on reality...

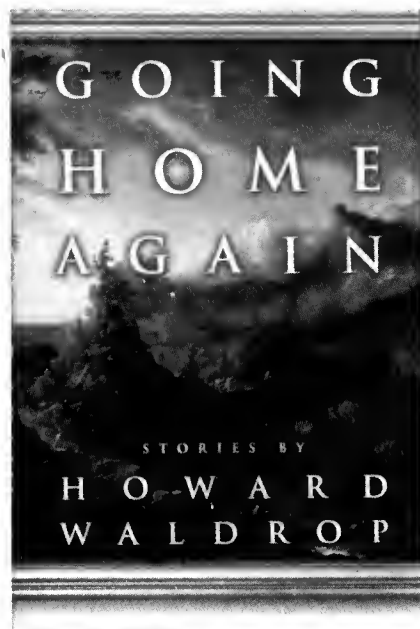
If you've read Howard Waldrop, this will not come as a surprise. *Going Home Again* (St Martin's Press, \$20.95) made me look up from time to time, a little awed by the sheer weight of matters about which I know *nothing*. What Waldrop does is concatenate past events and then throw in a slowly-acting poison called Fiction. Take "You Could Go Home Again": the American novelist of yore, Thomas Wolfe, has endured

surgery for tuberculosis of the brain, and is now a different man, "struggling to regain what he's lost." Until I read the story's afterword, I didn't know if Wolfe really *did* have such an operation. Waldrop expects a reader to be conned, and to work as hard as he has done. True or false, for example: Wolfe watched Fats Waller, the jazz pianist, storm through a long night of music while the two of them were travelling home from the 1940 Tokyo Olympics...

Waldrop is a beautiful liar. Nine longish stories are in this book, and each one is illuminated by an incisive autobiographical note. Showing how well-read Waldrop is, these notes are as important as the stories (we'll have to trust Waldrop that they're true). He has a wonderfully non-reverential way of describing how a story comes together ("I also bring J. D. Salinger in for a scratch behind the ears") and at one point writes: "Do yourself a favor: stop reading here and go listen to some Fats Waller." He then recommends a tape that he made up for himself, but I'd defy anyone to have everything on Waldrop's list! I repeat: he reminds the reader that there's much to learn. It *helps* if you're aware of the main players in Waldrop's stories, but if you don't, it doesn't matter.

"The Effects of Alienation" takes place against the backdrop of World War II, but it's an "alternate-Nazi" story starring Peter Lorre. This one exhibits Waldrop's deft touch with description ("the airship *Hermann Goring II* pulled into view like an art deco sausage" or "Peter had the voice of a small, adenoidal Austrian garter snake") and describes Brecht's fondness for "cheap American detective stories" and cheese. (I have no idea about that one either. Your guess is as good as mine.)

"The Sawing Boys" is written in a

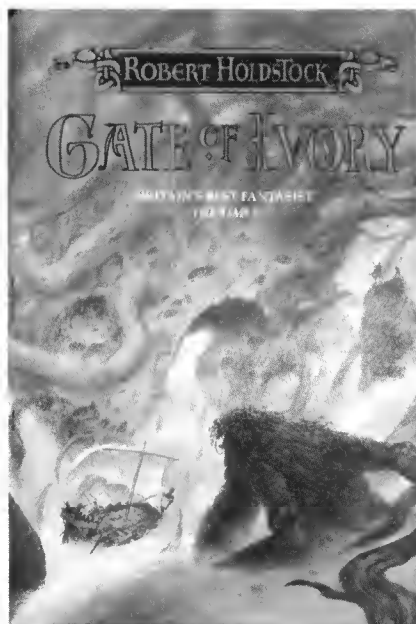


pseudo-hillbilly slang (Waldrop explains that it was written out of the side of his mouth, which is the best way of reading it); a glossary is provided. It's about a competition for those who can bend a saw and make musical notes. ("They gathered up their saws and ladders and walked toward the sweetest sounds this side of Big Bone Lick.") That's one strand at least; there's also a robbery plot and Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm! "Household Words" sees Charles Dickens on tour, performing a version of *A Christmas Carol* which has a very different ending from the one we know. "Why Did?" is best explained by the author: "Don't you wish sometimes you lived in a Fleischer cartoon world, with Betty Boop, Bimbo, Koko and Pudge? That when things were going great, and you were dancing, all the buildings and people and the moon and stars were dancing along with you? And when things were bad, even the trees would chase you?"

That Waldrop spends so much time fishing might be connected to his literary sloth, which is now the stuff of legend (he makes Joseph Heller's rate of production look like Lionel Fanthorpe's; and how many other writers are noticed for how *little* they produce?). So grab this one, if you can. *Going Home Again* is one to cherish.

It is Bo Fowler's misfortune to have his first novel, *Scepticism Inc.* (Jonathan Cape, £9.99), published so soon after Tibor Fischer's *The Collector Collector*, which has a similar angle of attack, but which knocks Fowler's work into a cocked hat. Although it is bad form to review a book by comparing it to another, a likening is inevitable. Both books have inanimate objects for narrators. *The Collector Collector* (1997) was narrated by an ancient bowl, and *Scepticism Inc.* is narrated by a supermarket trolley. But where *The Collector Collector* offered a weird urban fantasy and a farce that said much about humanity (especially city life), Fowler's debut ends up reading like a hamfisted piss-take of modern religion, and the characters are only so-so.

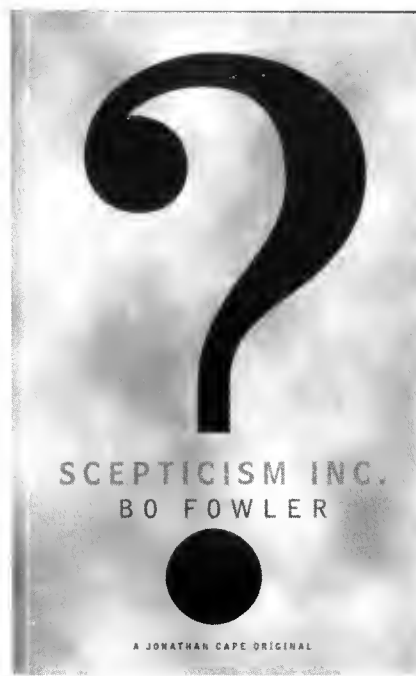
What would I have thought if I had read *Scepticism Inc.* first? Well, the book goes through three phases (of differing lengths). At first the reader is shell-shocked by the brief sections, some of them only one sentence long, which do not always seem to be going anywhere. Few sections run on from each other, so the reader, for example, absorbs Feedline A, Feedline B, Feedline C, and then is treated to Punchline B, Punchline C, Punchline A. Except it's more complicated than that, and not always funny. I found the opening winsome but tiresome,



and then it started to work on me.

Next door to the supermarket is a church that is soon known as the Metaphysical Betting Shop. Its owner becomes rich by establishing a system of gambling against impossible odds: "You want to bet on dull mundane things like the horses you go to a normal betting shop," Edgar says. "You want to bet on something metaphysical you come here. By metaphysical, I mean anything that refers to ... anything which cannot be proven true or false by the senses, anything religious." Asked how anybody could ever win, the answer is, "They can't... That's the beauty of the system." There's an amusing Helleresque anti-logic running through this book.

The computerized trolley (after stating, "I believed in coupons, bulk buying, special offers and God")



decides to bet £500,000 that God exists. (Later, the trolley climbs Mount Everest to prove his point.) Not that trolleys are the whole of Edgar's clientele. His betting shop is popular with religious leaders, of many faiths. ("The sixteenth Dalai Lama bet £6,000 that there is no self lying behind the constituent parts of a person." And an archbishop bets £2,500 that the Articles of the Church of England are true.) Edgar expands his business, opening branches in other locations. But despite his wealth (and his excellent badges, saying "I've put my money where my metaphysics are"), is he happy?

No. He's in love with a woman named Sophia, whose beauty is "downright dangerous. Men would willingly die for her ears alone." They do not get along, although there is hope that they might when a compromise is established: "Sophia and Edgar started to go out to argue." Sophia is convinced that the end of the world is nigh.

The book moves into a third phase when it becomes obvious that there will be little more development. Fowler uses the trolley's voice to articulate good questions about God and the materialization of religion is excellently lampooned (Pope Pop drinks, and Popcorn coming with the assurance that each piece has been blessed). Furthermore, there is Edgar's essay called "Why Religions Are Like Cereals" which contains the following: "Judaism is like All-Bran, dull. Islam is like bran flakes, sharing a lot of heritage with Judaism and Christianity but being a little harder to swallow." The plot, however, becomes equally indigestible.

This satire should have been shorter than its 247 pages. I was reminded of Eudora Welty's review of S. J. Perelman: "Give him a cliché and he takes a mile." Although Fowler has not exactly elaborated upon a cliché, by the end of the book there is a stale and familiar flavour about the enterprise.

Robert Holdstock's *Gate of Ivory* (Voyager, £16.99) is set in the same locale as *Mythago Wood* (and others): Ryhope Wood. It's a place where mythological creatures are commonplace, and often more dangerous than one might expect; an area of English forest which is bigger inside than it seems from the outside... Living close by, the Huxley family is devastated by the mythagos. After a raid by some mythological warriors, the mother kills herself, and the young boy, Chris, watches as his father slips into an obsession with the creatures. Chris is visited by a girl from the forest, and years later, Chris becomes more involved with the place, which results in some lovely writing: "To enter Ryhope was

to enter a confusion at the *edge* of things, a sensory jumble of sound and vision – glimpses and echoes that could not be grasped – that was both frightening and seductive.” Chris meets a group of people known as “the Forlorn Hope,” and mutual languages must be learnt. He gets involved in a love affair, and all paths are leading to the Gates of Ivory and Horn – which represent lies and truth, and through which Chris might be able to bring his mother back to life.

This is first-rate, well-paced fantasy (I particularly liked his description of “a group of women who could hold and weave the complex strands of fate that these many quests and tasks unravelled”); and theoretically, Holdstock could write as many novels set in Ryhope Wood as there are myths and legends to be acknowledged. The family’s surname in this book is Huxley, and I wondered if the author had read *The Art of Seeing* (1943) by Aldous Huxley, or whether it was a coincidence. From Huxley’s book, the following: “The eyes and nervous system do the sensing, the mind does the perceiving... Clear seeing is the product of accurate sensing and correct perceiving.” And clear seeing, for Holdstock’s characters, is a requisite for full admission to the splendours of Ryhope Wood. For the reader, only a clear head is necessary; and this should be one journey you enjoy.

Flanders by Patricia Anthony (Ace, \$23.95) is set in Northern France during World War I, and concerns an educated, sharp-shooting Texan called Stanhope who is fighting for the British. It’s an epistolary novel, made up of Stanhope’s prolific letters to his brother, which start fondly enough, but which get darker. They emphasize Stanhope’s isolation: there is never a response.

Despite Stanhope’s hatred for his boozing father, he starts drinking himself; and starts to be a nuisance. His views change (he suspects he might be gay), and soon he is blithely stating: “The work’s not bad, really. The Boche fall clean and sudden, just like bottle targets at a fair,” despite the fact that he was originally reluctant to kill. All the horrors of war, and the realities of bowel movements, are lovingly described; but it gets worse. After a comrade is killed in battle, Stanhope has recurring dreams in which his dead friends get up and walk. Has Stanhope gone mad because of the shells screaming over his head? Has he been drinking too much (he has been reprimanded for his drunken behaviour)? Or does Stanhope have another reason for being on Flanders’ fields – beyond that of shooting the enemy?

If I may end on a personal note, I’d like to say that I once did the same

day job as Patricia Anthony. Before the novel begins, in her dedication to the *Dallas Morning News*, the author explains that she has happy memories of her 15 years in telesales. I suffered it for nine months (and only then escaped by lying about a job offer I’d received to work in China:

true story). I am astonished that Anthony is capable of sequential thought, let alone of writing a good book, which Flanders undoubtedly is. The research has been thorough and meticulous; and the English dialect is well done, too.

David Mathew

Inherit the Earth – or Pay the Mortgage

Andy Robertson

Brian Stableford is one of the few Utopians left in sf. Over the past two decades this strand of the genre has almost died out. I’m not really equipped to trace the reasons behind this, but I guess that the end of the Space Age has been a crucial factor; that common future history of space stations and moon bases followed by interplanetary and interstellar community has gone, and with it an enormous legacy of hope has been removed from our shared dreams. Sf does still produce some positive projections, but these are located at an enormous distance, or in alternate futures, or in people’s subjectivities – or some proxy for them such as cyberspace – or in outright fantasy. The increasing hellishness of the real world over the next few centuries has become an axiom, and if there is a “common future history” now shared by the sf community it is one of total social and ecological collapse within the lifetime of our children.

Assuming the real future is as bleak as this, should sf writers (1) try to help us avoid hell or (2) concentrate on paying the mortgage? Most “sf writers” today are producing fantasy, science fantasy, pseudo-horror, alternate histories, alternate futures, space opera, or something which claims to be “hard science fiction” but which on examination is located in a timeline which decoupled from the real world around 1970. These stories are often very good indeed, but I cannot shake the belief that a certain moral primacy belongs to those who are trying to write about the real, near, immediate and actual future – trying to make projections from present social and environmental trends, trying to illuminate and to limit their speculations by genuine science, and trying to map a way through the real problems of the real tomorrow, not the imagined problems of yesterday’s tomorrow.

Among the few people doing this today are Brian Stableford, Kim Stanley Robinson and Bruce Sterling, three very different writers with very different ideas. Sterling urges us to embrace chaos in style, Robin-

son retains a stubborn faith in socialism, and Stableford pins his hopes on the genetic and biological reconstruction of human nature. What they all do share is a common core of beliefs that we might call SF Utopianism: that science is a faulty but valid reflection of objective reality, not a social construct; and that the human condition can be permanently, radically and beneficially changed only through science (though not necessarily by science alone). However much I might disagree with the morals, ideals and politics of these writers (and I am most in sympathy with Sterling), I entirely support them here.

Stableford’s recent Utopian fictions make up what I am going to call the “eMortal sequence.” This sequence started with “Sexual Chemistry” (*Interzone*, 1987), and has been trickling out through the cracks between vast slabs of science fantasy, pseudo-horror, and alternate history ever since. The basic assumption behind the eMortal Sequence is an accelerating transformation of the human condition through a perfected biotechnology, bringing a steadily increasing lifespan and total freedom from any sort of “natural” behavioural programming however conceived. The stories initially showed a light touch and a wonderfully effective humour, often cross-fertilized by Stableford’s other fictional obsessions, mostly from the 19th-century Decadents. As a bonus some of those mortgage-paying slabs were invaded by Stablefordian tech-biosymbionts and wonderfully transformed: most notably *The Empire of Fear*, that great book, which is somehow simultaneously a perfect vampire novel, a perfect alternate-history sf novel, and a perfect apologia for SF Utopianism rendered into fictional form.

Inherit the Earth (Tor, \$23.95) is set fairly early in the eMortal sequence, some time in the late 22nd century. The particular crux of the book is the ambiguous revelation that an ecosystem-saving plague of

human sterility known as the Crisis was engineered by artificial means. This revelation is undercut, contradicted and reaffirmed repeatedly throughout the story, which is really an extended pantomime of kidnap and misinformation framing a lot of debates about and demonstrations of the ongoing bio-social transformations. The protagonist is not the usual refined asocial aesthete, but an ex-streetfighter, one of a group who deliberately push their nanotechnological repair systems to the limit while recording their combats for commercial VR playback, and his girlfriend is a convincingly damaged groupie. Unlike almost everything else Stableford has written the book makes an honest effort to show the impact of the new technologies on ordinary people (thick people, poor people, violent people) and succeeds pretty well. Stableford has become very much better at writing the novel of character, and though you remain brutally aware of the next info-dump poised above your head it is possible to read this as a simple sf adventure with an unusually rich and deep background.

But for someone who has followed Stableford's work in the last decade it has to be a bit of a disappointment. The collective background of the eMortal sequence is illuminated, but there is little here that is new. The novel is based on a short story which appeared in *Analog* in 1995, and too much that would pass in a short story is left unelaborated at novel length. For example, we learn that the response to the Crisis has been the institution of the New Reproductive System, a process whereby octogenarians get together in groups of four or more and foster children ectogenetically grown from donor gametes. We are told that the world society has achieved "democratic control of human fertility" by this means, but we are not told why anyone should use such a ridiculous way of producing offspring when simply licensing the use of the artificial wombs would do the trick. Nor for that matter do we discover why there are no more Muslims wishing to rear warriors for Allah, no more Mormons wishing to release the souls of their unborn ancestors, no more couples who simply want to have children together, and – above all – no apparent need to crush or even discourage such dissidents. The whole scenario lacks dissension and variety, and that is a sin which may be tolerated at the more focused short-story length but will never do in a novel.

Whatever the faults of this particular segment, the eMortal sequence is *not* a minor work, and I think this book would serve as an excellent introduction to it – at least for someone who has not (as I have) read everything else Stableford has published several times over. In point of

fact I am sure many of Stableford's ideas are totally wrong: I don't think the world is falling into hell, and I think the problems that will really obsess our descendants a hundred years from now would appear as daft as the Yellow Peril if they were presented in fictional form today. I do not believe that SF Utopians can predict the real future; but then no one does believe that, least of all the SF Utopians themselves. What I support in the fiction of Stableford, Sterling and Robinson and find almost

nowhere else is not this or that solution, but the general principles I delineated above: that science is a window on to the Real; that its impact on humanity has only just started, is tremendous, and will be far greater in the future than it is now; and that however painful it is, that impact will be ultimately beneficial. These things are desperately important, and I wish the main channel of sf would turn to address them again, as once it did.

Andy Robertson

Sects, Cults – and a Revelation Rigged to Kill

Molly Brown

In *Sects, "Cults" and Alternative Religions* (Blandford, £12.99), David V. Barrett presents a largely unbiased and non-judgmental overview of the beliefs and practices of more than 60 alternative religions. Most of the groups you would expect to find covered in a book on the subject of cults and alternative faiths are present and accounted for: the Moonies, the Hare Krishnas, the Children of God, the Orange People – though not necessarily under those names. These days they're the Unification Church, ISKCON, the Family, and OSHO International.

No prizes for guessing which denomination gets the largest number of pages devoted to it... but more on Scientology later.

We tend to think of the current profusion of religions and sects as a late-20th-century phenomenon, but according to David V. Barrett, it's really nothing new. A lot of today's so-called cults are actually reworkings of old Christian heresies, some of them dating back to before the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. Others are based on much older, pre-Christian beliefs.

There was an explosion of new religious sects throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. A few of these, such as the Quakers, are still around; others have had their ideas borrowed by the latest crop of new religions. The 19th century was another fertile time for the development of religious thought and the founding of new faiths, many of which are still active, though several intriguingly named sects, such as the Jerkers and Barkers, are no longer with us, alas.

A number of the alternative religions practised in the West today are based on, or inspired by, Hinduism or Eastern philosophy. Others have more modern roots and could only have emerged out of the 20th-century obsession with therapy; some of them have more in common with psychological counselling services than with

churches.

Barrett has done his best to be fair to all of them. Even when dealing with such incidents as the mass suicide of some 900 members of the People's Temple or the Waco shoot-out, he never indulges in condemnation or tabloid-style hysteria. The information in the book was mostly compiled from a questionnaire sent to each of the groups he surveyed, inviting them to explain what they believed and why, and how they would respond to any allegations and criticisms made against them. Where there are doubts about veracity, or substantiated accusations of anything from sleep-deprivation to sexual impropriety, these are pointed out... though perhaps a bit too gently for those of a less tolerant disposition.

The balancing act continues in an appendix which includes contact addresses for cult-watching organizations as well as those for the movements featured in the book.

My main criticism is an easy and obvious one to make: no matter how many sects are included, I can't help wondering why others were left out. The selection is wide, but not comprehensive. I would have expected a survey of world religions to have a section on Voodoo, for example. And though the book was originally published in 1996, I think it would have been worthwhile to update the 1998 paperback edition to include something on Heaven's Gate. That said, the mixture presented is a diverse and interesting one, and though Heaven's Gate is woefully missing, it wasn't the only modern creed to have elements of science fiction.

The Church of All Worlds takes much of its teachings and ritual from Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and includes science fiction among an individual's choice of spiritual paths. It is the sincere belief of members of the Aetherius Society that a huge spaceship called Satellite

Three is in close orbit around the earth. The Raelian Movement was founded by a Frenchman who was first contacted by beings from another planet in 1973. After a couple of years of giving him messages to pass on to mankind, they took him on a visit to their planet in 1975. Raelians have several interesting beliefs, including the idea that "... subatomic particles of atoms are themselves galaxies, containing stars, planets and people, and that our own galaxy is a tiny par-

ticle of an atom of a living being on a planet revolving around a sun in a galaxy." We've all read a few novels based on that one.

But what about the religion actually founded by a science-fiction writer? The chapter on Scientology has elements of a political thriller, with stories of power struggles and coups, intelligence units, dirty tricks campaigns, break-ins at U.S. government offices, and infiltration by undercover agents.

Then there's this revelation that's "rigged to kill" anyone who hasn't undergone years of intensive training to reach the level of "Operating Thetan III." Apparently the knowledge contained in this revelation nearly did in L. Ron Hubbard himself when he first learned of it. Barrett has included a condensed version of this potentially fatal revelation on page 256; read it at your own risk.

You have been warned.

Molly Brown

And so the decrepit banner of post-Tolkien sword-and-sorcery is carried on, arriving in the hands of yet another pretender to the Professor's rune-encrypted throne.

Visit any high-street bookshop if you require proof that epic, multi-volume fantasy is a vastly overcrowded field. For a novel to succeed amid such relentless competition, it has to be something stark and innovative, serving a necessity to take the well-worn path a little further. So what has this meant in practical terms?

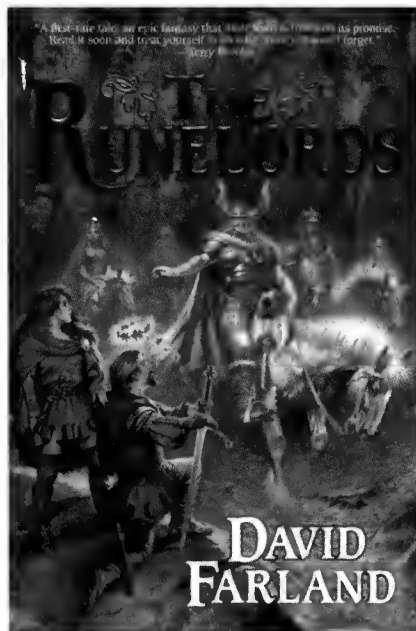
Certainly, it has given rise to an increase in the sexual content of fantasy works. Where once a beautiful maiden could be charmed by a youth possessed of true heart, now she is gang-raped by a ragged band whose heroism is more than questionable. It is logical that excess sells. Why read *The Mountains of Mavakhan* when you can read *Forest of Bondage*? Thankfully, there are one or two new writers who have not (yet) succumbed to the temptation of flesh pleasures within their pages.

David Farland is one of them. His mammoth fantasy *The Sum of All Men* (Tor \$25.95, Earthlight, £9.99) is traditional, disciplined and surprisingly enchanting. It is also immaculately presented with bold fonts, lavish cover-illustration and the detailed location maps provided as standard in all books of this sub-genre.

Sub-titled "Volume One of *The Runelords*", the novel is divided into five separate "books" (although the fifth is merely a brief Afterword). I must admit being a little surprised by *The Sum of All Men*. The author has dispensed with the usual lengthy prologue-cum-world-guide and has elected, instead, to plunge straight into the central plot, beginning with a frenzied battle in a darkened alley between a City Guard sergeant and a mysterious spice-merchant. Farland has concentrated on plot progression rather than background colour-text and this is to be encouraged.

Every new fantasy has to contribute something original to the mix and David Farland's contribution is particularly inventive. It is this: every important character in the novel (mainly consisting of *Runelords* and royalty) is possessed of extraordinary endowments, indicated by

runes branded into their flesh. These endowments are not conjurations of magic but actual physical and mental attributes (brawn, grace, metabolism, wit, etc) gleaned from the peasant classes. Once taken, the attributes benefit the recipient until their death and/or the death of their suppliers – the practical upshot of which is demonstrated during the first book when an attack on the king's suppliers (or Dedicates, as



Moral Grumbles and Farland Fantasies

David L. Stone

they are called) results in the monarch losing 40 percent of his memory.

The main story sees young Prince Gaborn Orden battling the evil forces of Raj Ahten, Wolf Lord. Standard stuff, you might say – although there are a number of ironic asides. Gaborn is accompanied on his journey by long-serving bodyguard Borenson and a personal chronicler referred to as Days. The former is a well-drawn yet bog-standard henchman and the latter is a curious invention indeed. Days is an observer of lives, a sulky (and for the most part silent) shadow of the young Prince, following his movements for the Time Lords in order to publish an accurate account of his life – posthumously. This is not a curse thrust upon Gaborn personally, but a burden every nobleman or woman must bear. There is brief mention of the reason why Rofehaven royalty must tolerate these lurking nuisances, although I personally can think of nothing worse than someone trailing you for the duration of your existence with half an ear open for every curse you care to utter. Thankfully, the prince manages to escape for a while at the beginning of the second book, sub-titled "Day 19 of the Month of Harvest – A Glorious Day for an Ambush."

Farland chooses to chart his specific rise of darkness over a five-day period, corresponding to each of the five books. This is an extremely brief time-frame for a work of heroic fantasy (considering that many such novels cross generations) and yet another step away from the pit-trap of Tolkienism.

Incidentally, I would urge the casual reader not to be intimidated by the size of the book which is due largely to oversized fonts; it is, in fact, quite easily digestible. Even the slowest and most deliberate of readers can take comfort from being able to polish off *The Sum of All Men* in the time-frame outlined within the text!

David L. Stone

The American publisher appears mistakenly to have shown only the title of the series on both this book jacket and the spine – however, on the title page, the name of the novel is shown correctly as *The Runelords: The Sum of All Men*.

A new paperback edition of H. Rider Haggard's lost-race novel *The People of the Mist* (originally Longmans, 1894) has been published by a company calling itself "Pulp Fictions" (£4.99 from PO Box 144, Polegate, East Sussex BN26 6NW). I am intrigued by the use of that phrase – *pulp fictions* – and by the fact that somebody clearly thinks it is applicable to Rider Haggard. By coincidence, whether or not Haggard was a pulpster is a subject which has interested me of late.

Originally the term "pulp fiction" applied only to stories first published in pulp magazines – which is to say fiction-dominated magazines of a certain middling size, with spines, printed on rough woodpulp paper and ranging in time from Frank Munsey's *The Argosy*, which went pulp in late 1896, to Lou Silberkleit's *Real Western*, which produced its final issue in early 1959 and which magazine-expert Mike Ashley assures me was "the last true pulp." In other words, pulpdom had a 60-year span, from the 1890s to the 1950s. Latterly, however, the phrase pulp fiction has been applied to things other than the stories which appeared in those magazines. There is an entry for "Lesbian Pulp Fiction" in the *Bloomsbury Guide to Women's Literature* (edited by Claire Buck, 1992) – referring to paperback-original novels of the 1950s and 1960s, on lesbian themes, of the sort that Marion Zimmer Bradley and others used to write under pseudonyms. I have seen references to "lesbian pulp" elsewhere, implying that for many modern-day feminists what "pulp" primarily means is those paperbacks.

There is a well-known pop group called Pulp, although how they arrived at their name I don't know*, and, more recently, a very famous and successful movie by Quentin Tarantino called *Pulp Fiction* (1994). In the wake of Tarantino's film, Maxim Jakubowski edited an anthology called *The Mammoth Book of Pulp Fiction* (Robinson, 1996) – only eight, or possibly nine, of whose 32 stories are actually drawn from pulp magazines (the majority of the remainder first appeared in digest-sized magazines of the 1950s to the 1980s, such as *Manhunt* and *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine*, or were commissioned especially for the book; the Dashiell Hammett story, "Too Many Have Lived," appeared first in a "big slick," *The American Magazine*). What pulp fiction seems to mean for Tarantino, and for Jakubowski, is hardboiled crime, or

* Pulp the pop group arrived at their name by shortening their original choice, *Arabacus Pulp*, which they found in a *Financial Times* commodities list. However, their songs, particularly the most recent album, *This is Hard Core*, explore the shady areas of life most associated with noir pulp fiction.

– Paul Brazier

Was Rider Haggard a Pulpster?

David Pringle

what is often referred to as *noir*, fiction. It is true that the periodicals where the modern private-eye story first evolved in the 1920s and 1930s, principally *Black Mask* and *Dime Detective*, were indeed pulp magazines, but the vast majority of the hardboiled stuff which has appeared since comes from non-pulp venues. Nevertheless, to many people nowadays it's all "pulp."

There has also been a recent tendency among critics to push pulp backwards in time, to use the word retrospectively to refer to all the popular fiction of the 19th century which appeared in story papers, dime novels or weekly five-cent "libraries" (in Britain, the last were always referred to as "novettes" until we picked up the American habit of using that word in a non-judgmental way to refer simply to any fictional work of a length longer than a short story but shorter than a novella). There is some justice in this, given that the story-paper literature did have a large influence on the subsequent pulp magazines, but there are at least two senses – one rather literal-minded, the other more of an expansive, theoretical argument – in which it seems to me to be inappropriate.

One of the defining characteristics of the pulp magazines is that they were printed on cheap paper made from wood pulp (as opposed to the traditional higher-quality paper made from cloth). The process of pulp-paper manufacture was invented in the mid-19th century and seems to have come into common use from the 1880s onwards. Pulp paper had the initial advantage of cheapness, but its disadvantage is that its high acid content causes it to discolour quickly and to turn brittle. I have in my possession a copy of an American story paper, *The Flag of Our Union*, from the 1850s which is definitely a pre-pulp product; when one places it alongside a typical pulp from the 1940s, say a copy of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*, one can see the large difference in paper quality. The paper on which *The Flag* is printed is still white; it may be subject to tearing, but it is not brittle. By contrast, my sample copy of *FFM* has to be kept in a plastic bag to hold it together, and every time I open the bag my knees are showered with

browned paper fragments. Although it is nearly a hundred years older, my sample copy of *The Flag* is in much better condition than my copy of *FFM*. Yet *The Flag of Our Union* was a popular, mass-market publication, containing fiction aimed at the widest possible audience and priced at a level which lower-middle-class readers (at the very least) could afford – so, in a metaphorical sense, it was "pulp."

The more serious point to be made is that the most significant ancestors – in fact, the immediate parents – of the pulp magazines were not the story papers and dime novels but the late-Victorian and Edwardian "standard magazines," which were the same size as the later pulps, printed on book-quality paper, and not exclusively devoted to fiction (though fiction was their predominant ingredient). I am referring, of course, to publications like *The Strand Magazine* and *Pearson's Magazine*, which are well known, at least by name, to sf readers for their publication of Conan Doyle and H. G. Wells among many others: I suppose one could call them the Gaslight Magazines, for want of a more recognizable generic term (see such derivative anthologies as *Science Fiction by Gaslight* edited by Sam Moskowitz [1968], *Beyond the Gaslight* edited by Hilary and Dik Evans [1976], and *Detection by Gaslight* edited by Douglas G. Greene [1997]). Where would the pulp adventure story have been without the late-19th-century examples of Robert Louis Stevenson, Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling (all writers for the gaslight magazines)? More specifically, where would the lost-race fantasy have been without Haggard? Where would Tarzan have been without Kipling and Mowgli? Where would the whole genre of pulp science fiction have been without Wells? And, most obviously, where would the entire genre of detective/crime fiction have been without Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes?

Stevenson, Haggard, Doyle, Kipling and Wells: these were the writers who set the parameters, both for the gaslight magazines and for the succeeding century's-worth of popular fiction (and film). They also created the forms: the series short story was essentially invented by Doyle, in 1891, in *The Strand Magazine*, with his first Holmes series (he had a few pointers from the long-dead Edgar Allan Poe, but the Chevalier Dupin trilogy of stories had been an abortive "near-series," appearing in three different magazines over a period of three or four years, rather than a series proper). The Doyle-invented magazine short-story series was so explosively popular that literally scores of writers immediately emulated it – not only in detective fiction but in other genres too: a few examples are C. J. Cut-

cliffe Hyne with his Captain Kettle adventures, Hesketh Prichard with his Don Q capers, Baroness Orczy with her Scarlet Pimpernel historicals, P. G. Wodehouse with his Jeeves-and-Wooster comedies, etc, etc – or, to choose one of the American examples of the period, Owen Wister with his Virginian westerns in *Harper's Monthly* (yes, *The Virginian* [1902] was a “fix-up” novel, built out of magazine short stories which had appeared over the preceding decade). Where would the later pulp-magazine story-series have been without all this background – without the examples of Holmes and Mowgli and Allan Quatermain, without Raffles and Stingaree and Kai Lung and the Old Man in the Corner and Father Brown and a hundred others?

In summary, I regard the pulps as they emerged from about 1905 (the earlier date of 1896, when *Argosy* first went pulp, is misleading insofar as that periodical had no direct competition for eight or nine years, a “field” of pulp magazines only emerging in 1904-1905, with the launches of Street & Smith's *Popular* and Munsey's *All-Story*) – I regard them as predominantly cheapened, further-popularized versions of the standard turn-of-the century magazines such as *The Strand*, *Pearson's*, *The Idler*, *The Pall Mall*, *The Windsor*, *Harmsworth's*, *Harper's*, *Lippincott's*, *McClure's*, *Munsey's*, etc. (This is very evident in Britain, where the first pulp, *The Grand Magazine* [from January 1905], was a sister publication of the more prestigious *Strand Magazine* – both were published by Newnes; and British magazine-expert Jack Adrian has described *The Grand* to me, in conversation, as “*The Strand Magazine's* dustbin.”) Yes, of course as the pulps developed they were influenced by the story-paper and dime-novel traditions too – the pulps were voracious: they took inspiration from *everywhere* – but, if I had to quantify it, I would say the pulps were about three-quarters late-Victorian standard magazine, and only about one-quarter dime novel and nickel library.

The pulps took their size (roughly 7x10 inches) from the turn-of-the-century standard magazines, and they took their story-telling traditions from those same magazines. With their advertising sections fore-and-aft, the early pulps looked like the gaslight magazines in almost every respect except that they were printed on rougher paper and tended to all-fiction contents. (And those popular standard monthlies, together with their larger, thinner siblings of the gaslight era such as *Pearson's Weekly* and *Collier's Once-a-Week*, were the ancestors of the “big slicks” too – i.e. the 20th-century magazines that went the glossy advertising-led

route rather than relying mainly on cover price for their income; but that's another story.) The narrative traditions are what matter, more than appearance and paper quality, and those traditions were laid down, above all, by the Big Five gaslight authors: Stevenson, Haggard, Doyle, Kipling and Wells. Of course, the said five were aided and abetted by scores of their contemporaries. It would be tedious to attempt to list them all here, but a plausible “little five” of the same turn-of-the century period (“the Age of the Storytellers,” as the critic Roger Lancelyn Green liked to call it) might well consist of Bram Stoker (horror), E. Nesbit (children's fantasy), Owen Wister (westerns), Stanley J. Weyman (historicals) and the multiply-gifted William Morris (considerably older than the other writers mentioned here, and not really a gaslight magazinist, but in his last years – which coincided with the height of the period we're talking about, the Golden Nineties – almost single-handed creator of the genre of secondary-world fantasy). Throw in Anthony Hope (Ruritanian romances) and M. R. James (ghost stories) to make it a “little seven,” if you like; but the list can be extended at will.

The gaslight era – roughly from 1883, when Stevenson published *Treasure Island*, up until the eve of World War I – was a time of synthesis and synchronicity, when readerships were rising, journalism was booming, and a large group of talented new writers suddenly emerged to cater for the age's imaginative needs. At their best, what these writers did was marry the popular to the artistic – they took the vulgar but lively influences of the penny dreadfuls, boys' papers and dime novels they had read in their youth and blended them with the more literary traditions of the High Victorian novel, creating a vigorous new middlebrow

synthesis. Most of their work took the form of short stories, novellas and short novels (as opposed to the ponderous Victorian “three-deckers”) for which they found eager audiences in the magazines. Their novels did not appear solely in magazines – Rider Haggard's first success, *King Solomon's Mines*, was published straight into book form in 1885, although almost everything he wrote later was serialized first – but the magazines made the full extension of these writers' careers possible.

The Age of the Storytellers was mainly a British phenomenon (the USA seems not to have had talented writers in sufficient numbers in the 1880s and 1890s, with a few major exceptions such as Mark Twain). But its authors were published widely in American magazines as well as British – it is often forgotten that Doyle's Sherlock Holmes made his first magazine appearance not in *The Strand* but in a U.S. periodical, *Lippincott's* (the same magazine, in the same year, also commissioned Oscar Wilde to write *The Picture of Dorian Gray*) – and, as I say, it was in the American pulp magazines after about 1905 that the influence of the gaslight magazines was most keenly felt. There were to be pulp magazines in Britain too, but of a more anaemic variety; English pulpsters like Sax Rohmer, Edgar Wallace and even Agatha Christie were soon to find their main magazine markets in the States. Of the original “big five” Storytellers, all born in the 1850s and 1860s, all coming of age as writers after 1880, only one actually published in the pulps to any significant degree (leaving aside the copious reprints of H. G. Wells in the early sf pulps, which were due to Hugo Gernsback's initiative, not Wells's) – and that one was Rider Haggard.

From *Ayesha: The Return of She* (1905) onwards, much of Haggard's fiction was serialized in pulp magazines before book publication, that particular novel appearing in the second American pulp, Street & Smith's *The Popular Magazine* (January-August 1905; it also appeared in Britain's *Windsor Magazine* – not a pulp – at the same time, but the U.S. serialization was in bigger chunks and ended sooner, so *The Popular's* readers had the complete text in their hands first: on such hair-splittings whole theses can be built). The February 1914 issue of another Street & Smith pulp, *The New Story*, has a cover which advertises three well-known authors, among others: Rider Haggard, Edgar Rice Burroughs and Edgar Wallace. So Haggard not only influenced Burroughs, but they actually rubbed shoulders in the same pulp (together with the creator of Sanders of the River). The Haggard serialization in that case was of his novel *Allan and the Holy Flower*;



other Haggard yarns which appeared in U.S. pulps prior to book publication included *Morning Star* (Cavalier, 1909-1910), *The Ivory Child* (Blue Book, 1915) and *Finished* (Adventure, 1917). In Britain, his late serial "She Meets Allan" appeared in the pulp *Hutchinson's Story Magazine* (1919-20) well before its publication in book form as *She and Allan* (1921).

Haggard's main contribution to the pulps was the lost-race/lost-world motif (which was to spawn many cousins, or similar sub-genres, in popular fiction – tales of forbidden enclaves, Ruritania, planetary romance, prehistoric neverworlds, fantasy-lands accessed by "portals," etc). He did not quite invent the lost-land story – there had been prior hints of it in various utopian fictions and in the novels of Jules Verne and Bulwer Lytton – but he remade it as new, by combining many realistic touches based on his South African experiences with his powerful and at times grotesque imagination and his marvellous ability to handle violent action. Nobody wrote better battle scenes than Rider Haggard, and nobody created more memorable warriors. The supernatural themes which recurred in his stories – particularly the notion of reincarnation, and of doomed loves crossing the ages – appealed strongly to women (versions of them turn up in the bad but best-selling occult fantasies of his contemporary Marie Corelli, and in other women's fiction of the day) as well as to men, and so he succeeded in reaching a vast audience. His early novels, *King Solomon's Mines* and *She*, seem never to have been out of print, and have been filmed many times.

It is via the pulps that Haggard's main legacy can be traced. As a writer of historical novels and colonial romances (along with Stevenson and Kipling), he influenced the whole Adventure-magazine school of pulpsters – writers like Talbot Mundy, Harold Lamb, Arthur O. Friel and H. Bedford-Jones – and as a lost-race fantasist he influenced many of those who wrote for *Argosy*, *All-Story* and other titles – pre-eminent among them Edgar Rice Burroughs, whose Tarzan series began to appear in 1912, but also A. Merritt, James Francis Dwyer, Charles B. Stilson, William L. Chester and numerous others, extending to various contributors to the sf magazines such as Philip José Farmer. By way of both these streams, which might be identified with the magazines *Adventure* and *All-Story* although they cropped up in most of the general pulps, he was a prime influence on Robert E. Howard, creator of such fantasy adventurers as King Kull, Solomon Kane and Conan the Barbarian for *Weird Tales*. When we come across a

passage such as this in Howard, we are reading pure Haggard:

"He emerged into a vast domed chamber... It was octagonal in shape... At the farther side of the great room there rose a dais with broad lapis-lazuli steps leading up to it, and on that dais there stood a massive chair with ornate arms and a high back... Behind the throne there was a narrow arched doorway..."
– Robert E. Howard, "Jewels of Gwahlur,"
Weird Tales, March 1935

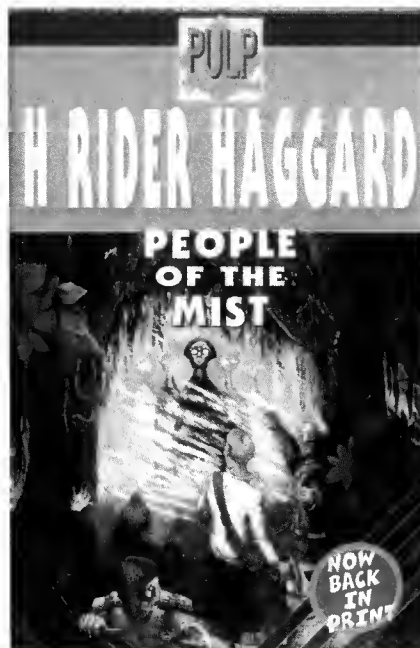
Compare Burroughs:

"Tarzan found himself upon the threshold of an enormous chamber, the walls of which converged toward the opposite end, where a throne stood upon a dais... The room was vacant except for two warriors who stood before the doors that flanked the throne dais..."
– Edgar Rice Burroughs, "Tarzan and the Ant Men," *Argosy All-Story*,
February-March 1924

Compare Haggard:

"At last we came to the head of the cave, where there was a rock dais... On either side of this dais were passages leading, Billali informed me, to other caves full of dead bodies... On the dais was a rude chair of black wood inlaid with ivory... Suddenly there was a cry of "Hiya! Hiya!" ("She! She!"), and thereupon the entire crowd of spectators instantly precipitated itself upon the ground, and lay still... A long string of guards began to defile from a passage to the left, and ranged themselves on either side of the dais. Then followed about a score of male mutes, then as many women mutes bearing lamps, and then a tall white figure, swathed from head to foot, in whom I recognized *She* herself. She mounted the dais and sat down upon the chair."

– H. Rider Haggard, "She: A History of Adventure," *The Graphic*,
October 1886-January 1887



Haggard is the spiritual father of *Sword and Sorcery* – and not solely because he happened to write a novel, the Icelandic pseudo-saga *Eric Brighteyes* (1891), which specifically prefigures that sub-genre.

Robert E. Howard, along with many of his co-contributors to *Weird Tales* and the later pulp *Unknown*, established sword and sorcery, and thus became a prime mover – together with Edgar Rice Burroughs – in the eventual establishment of modern fantasy as a book-publishing category well after World War II (and well after the deaths of both authors). Rider Haggard, one may claim, was the great initiator. His key theme of the lost land or lost race could be seen as a way into an understanding of fantasy as a whole. If fantasy is the Fiction of the Heart's Desire, it may be that one of the principal desires it embodies is the wish to retrieve the *lost*. Perhaps the entire vogue for fantasy over the past century, and especially in the last few decades, is due precisely to the fact that we have "lost" so much, to the fact that the world as a whole has become dis-enchanted. There is a phrase in the last line of Haggard's preface to *The People of the Mist* which is rather haunting – his reference to "this small and trodden world." It is a phrase that expresses the essential pathos of the lost-race tale, a pathos evident to Haggard himself as early as 1894, and which implies that fictions such as his own were a sort of last-ditch stand against a modern world which had just lately become demystified, thanks to the great voyages of discovery such as Captain Cook's and (in a different sense) Charles Darwin's, thanks to real-life African explorers like Livingstone and Stanley, and thanks to the scientific and anthropological researches of numerous *savants* – explorations and researches which had borne magnificent fruit in terms of the extension of human knowledge but which had also pumped this poor old globe dry of magic and wonder.

The People of the Mist was first serialized in George Newnes's *Tit-Bits*, a chapter or so at a time, from 23rd December 1893 to 18th August 1894. (In those days *Tit-Bits* was a weekly story paper, of sorts, although much of its content consisted of the kind of factual, "human-interest" titbits that the journal's title promised.) If not one of his finest romances, it could be labelled good, middle-range Haggard. It is not a story belonging to the Allan Quatermain series, but follows a similar pattern: the English hero, Leonard Outram, goes to Africa to make his fortune and, after many tribulations, succeeds in doing so (and in winning the hand of a beautiful woman). The crux is his discovery of a lost race, the titular People of the Mist who are

the worshippers of a giant crocodile and the guardians of great wealth in the form of precious stones. Throughout Leonard is aided by a native African companion who is the novel's happiest creation – in fact one of the most memorable “dwarfs” in all fantasy fiction: Otter, the infinitely brave, wise, humorous, four-foot-tall black warrior capable of crushing most men of normal stature, who turns out to be the living image of one of the lost people's gods (they worship him accordingly). The book

has longueurs: some of the love stuff is tediously “Victorian,” and the story is marred by a touch of anti-semitism (not normally characteristic of Haggard) – the agent, if not exactly the cause, of Leonard's impoverishment at the beginning of the novel is a *nouveau-riche* Jew – but the African details of the bulk of the narrative, the atmospheric set-pieces and the vigorous action scenes, all rise to their occasions.

Coming nearly a decade after *King Solomon's Mines* and *She*, it broke no

new ground, but this proficient exercise in exotic adventure was precisely the kind of story which was to set the pattern for so much pulp-magazine fiction in the first half of the 20th century. Yes, Rider Haggard was a pulpster, arguably the most influential of all pulpsters; and, yes, the publishers – who are also reissuing *She*, *Ayesha* and *She and Allan* this autumn – seem to be justified in their choice of name, Pulp Fictions.

David Pringle

Perhaps unwisely, I agreed to review *The Civilisation Game and Other Stories*, by Clifford D. Simak, edited by Francis Lyall (Severn House, £16.99). But it had something in it I desperately wanted to read – “The Big Front Yard.”

David Pringle and I are both Clifford Simak devotees. When he mentioned this book to me, he pointed out that it was the first time that one of Simak's greatest stories had become available in a British collection. I was lukewarm about reviewing the book until I realized that, despite my excellent Simak collection, including several first editions, I did not have this story. Classic Simak I had not read? I was hooked.

This volume was assembled mainly to show how Simak used ideas in his early fiction, and to make available stories otherwise out of print. Reading the collection straight through, it is also obvious that Simak did develop as a writer. The oldest story here is “Hermit of Mars,” which appeared in *Astounding* in 1939. The most recent is “Bucket of Diamonds” from *Galaxy* in 1969. In “Hermit of Mars” we find such believable character names as Kent Clark and Howard Carter, and unnecessarily repeated information –

Charley Wallace, squatting on the floor of the igloo, was scraping the last trace of flesh from the pelt of a Martian beaver. Kent watched the deft twist of his wrist, the flashing of knife blade in the single tiny radium bulb which illuminated the igloo's interior.

In a less interesting story, these faults would be severe obstructions to enjoyment. With Simak, one glosses over them with joy, happy to be in the presence of his stimulating ideas.

By the 1950s, Simak was at the peak of his powers, and the classic story that I so wanted to read is from this period. “The Big Front Yard” was first published in *Astounding* in October 1958. It bears all the hallmarks of Simak – a small-town mid-west setting, a loner who encounters something weird, the involvement of a largely inept officialdom, and the tri-

Small Town Underground

Paul Brazier

umph of small-town values and neighbourliness over everything the galaxy and humanity can throw at it. There is hardly a word out of place, and Simak leads us through the wildest of improbabilities by such graduations and in such understated prose that it is difficult to believe that we have believed what we have just read.

The title story, “The Civilization Game,” is worth the price of the book alone. Again first published in 1958, it anticipates by a long way the cliché story of “the war game is real,” and, like all Simak's writing, has a clear and homely moral to deliver alongside its tales of utter strangeness.

When I discovered that I already possessed “The Big Front Yard” in my *Analog/Astounding* collection, I was only slightly miffed; all the stories in this collection are worth the time taken to read them. What came as something of a surprise was how they carry influence down the years.

In Spider Robinson's novel *Lifeforce* (Baen, \$5.99), one of the central characters finds a technologically impossible artefact buried in the woods exactly as happens in “The Big

Front Yard.” Of course, Spider's story-telling technique and story are very different from Simak's, but still we have firmly-held small town values triumphing in the face of adversity.

Now Spider Robinson is not the world's greatest writer of prose, and I tend to recoil from stories set in the world of sf fandom. So it is a tribute to Spider's story-telling ability that after I left this book on the train (in contrast with the Dave Stone novel of recent memory), I was so driven to finish it that I first went back to Forbidden Planet, and in its absence there, to Murder One, and finally to Andromeda on the Internet to obtain another copy, and that I have it here in front of me now, albeit its further adventures have left it soaked in a liberally sized whisky mac.

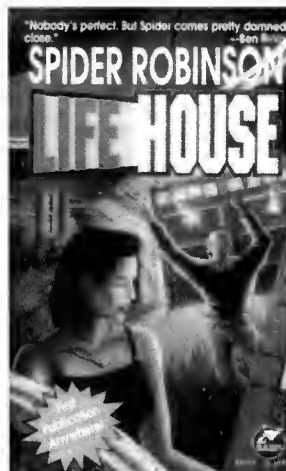
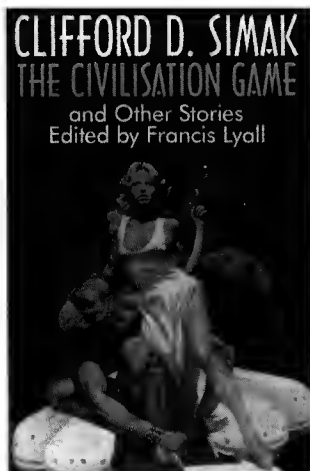
The idea behind the book is amazingly similar to the Eric Brown story “Onward Station” in this issue of *Interzone*. The characters and the situations, however, could not be more different. Spider examines in considerable detail how it may be possible to invent and run a very clever scam, but how it is not morally right to do it just because you can get away with it.

Similarly, the collection of Spider Robinson writings *User Friendly* (Baen, \$5.99) begins with unusual and fascinating crimes that have moral, not legal, solutions. I was less than happy with some of the contents of this book, for, while Spider is enough of a professional to ensure that we have enough information in a story to understand it, when he gets onto horrible puns, and then onto

rapping like Lord Buckley it becomes increasingly apparent that if you don't know the context, you won't understand the writing. Particularly, as I have a record of Lord Buckley, I can see where Spider is coming from with raps like “Teddy the Fish,” but without that context, it is just so much gibberish.

Still and all, it has been a while since we had anything new from Spider Robinson, so we should encourage him. Go out and buy these books.

Paul Brazier



BOOKS RECEIVED



JUNE
1998

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anderson, Kevin J., and Doug Beason. **Lethal Exposure.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00536-5, 290pp, A-format paperback, cover by Danilo Ducak, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; it's "a Craig Kreident thriller," seemingly a follow-up to the same authors' *Virtual Destruction* and *Fallout*, featuring the same FBI hero; like all their joint books, it's also hard sf.) 1st July 1998.

Anthony, Patricia. **God's Fires.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00537-3, 375pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Smollin, \$6.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997; a highly-praised sf take on Portuguese history which has King Afonso witnessing "God Himself fall to Earth in a ship, round like an acorn"; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 122.) 1st July 1998.

Ballard, J. G. **Cocaine Nights.** Counterpoint, ISBN 1-887178-66-X, 329pp, hardcover, \$23. (Non-sf [but near-sf] novel by a leading sf writer, first published in the UK, 1996; proof copy received; this is the American first edition of Ballard's most recent novel, its appearance in the USA delayed for over 18 months by yet another change of publisher; "Counterpoint" is a literary imprint we haven't heard of before, based in Washington D.C.) Late entry: May publication, kindly sent to us by Paul Di Filippo in June 1998.

Baxter, Stephen. **Moonseed.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-225426-3, 536pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this copy came without any advance blurb, but it's another Baxter mega-novel and it seems to be about terraforming the Moon.) 3rd August 1998.

Cadigan, Pat. **Tea From an Empty Cup.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86665-8, 254pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; Cadigan's first new novel in half a decade, it seems to be in her usual cyberpunk mode despite the mainstream-sounding title.) October 1998.

Callander, Don. **Marbleheart.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00538-1, 278pp, A-format paperback, cover by Dan Horne, \$5.99. (Light fantasy novel, first edition; about a sea otter with magical powers, it seems to be linked to the author's series comprising *Pyromancer* [1992], *Aquamancer* [1993], *Geomancer* [1994] and *Aeromancer* [1997].) 1st June 1998.

Carroll, Jerry Jay. **Inhuman Beings.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00529-2, 249pp, trade paperback, cover by Victor Stabin, \$13. (Sf[?]/crime novel, first edition; the author's second novel, following his animal fantasy *Top Dog* [1996]; the publishers do not give it a generic label, so it is hard to tell whether or not it's sf as opposed to supernatural horror/fantasy; the central character is a private eye.) 1st July 1997.

Chapman, Vera. **The Three Damosels.** Vista, ISBN 0-575-60108-6, 383pp, A-format paperback, cover by Danny Flynn, £5.99. (Arthurian fantasy omnibus, first published in 1978; the three novels it contains, *The Green Knight*, *The King's Damsel* and *King Arthur's Daughter*, were first published separately in 1975-76; they recently formed the basis of a full-length animated movie, *The Magic Sword*, reviewed by Mike Ashley in *Interzone* 134.) 18th June 1998.

Ciencin, Scott. **Night of Glory: Book 3 of The Elven Ways.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-77983-8, 246pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *The Ways of Magic* and *Ancient Games*, neither of which we recall seeing.) June 1998.

Collins, Paul, ed. **The MUP Encyclopaedia of Australian Science Fiction & Fantasy.** Assistant editors Steven Paulsen and Sean McMullen. Foreword by Peter Nicholls. Melbourne University Press, ISBN 0-522-84802-8, xvi+188pp, large-format softcover, A\$29.95. (Encyclopedia of sf and fantasy by Australian writers, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at A\$39.95 [not seen]; although its 200-page extent may not seem very large, its unillustrated double-column layout and fairly small [but clear] type allow it to cram in a good deal of information, including what appear to be complete short-story listings [in addition to book-listings, with publishers' names] for all the authors covered; this is a splendid addition to the reference shelf; if it seems odd that a "minor" country like

Australia should produce such a book, in another sense it is to be expected: both of the first general encyclopedias of English-language sf – Donald H. Tuck's three-volume effort [1974-1983] and Peter Nicholls's single-volume tome [1979; second edition with John Clute, 1993] – were edited by Australians; presumably, when someone comes to publish the first-ever encyclopedia of Canadian sf it too will be edited by an Aussie.) June 1998.

Dann, Jack, and Gardner Dozois, eds. **Immortals.** "Eight timeless tales of life everlasting..." Ace, ISBN 0-441-00539-X, x+255pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jean-Francois Podevin, \$5.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; it contains reprint stories on the immortality theme, from various sources, by Brian Aldiss, Greg Egan ["Learning to Be Me," from *Interzone*], Damon Knight, P. J. Plauger, Robert Silverberg, Clifford D. Simak, Brian Stableford [his excellent "Mortimer Gray's History of Death," from *Asimov's*] and Jack Vance; a good little anthology of classic tales: recommended.) 1st July 1997.

Delacorte, Peter. **Time on My Hands: A Novel.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06546-X, 397pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997; pitched at the mainstream audience, it concerns time-travel into the past in an attempt to change political history; the hero becomes a 1930s screenwriter, so it also qualifies as a "Hollywood novel"; it's illustrated with occasional black-and-white period photographs in a way that is highly reminiscent of Jack Finney's *Time and Again* [1970], which used the same conceit; the author, who does not appear to be young, has written two previous novels, both presumably non-fantastic, called *Levantine* and *Games of Chance*.) 4th June 1998.

Dozois, Gardner, ed. **The Year's Best Science Fiction: Fifteenth Annual Collection.** St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-18779-3, lxii+623pp, hardcover, \$29.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at \$17.95, which we have already listed here; it contains stories by Stephen Baxter, Gregory Benford, Alan Brennert, Greg Egan [twice], Carolyn Ives Gilman, Simon Ings, Gwyneth Jones, James Patrick Kelley, John Kessel, Nancy Kress, Geoffrey A. Landis, Paul J. McAuley, Ian McDonald, Ian R. MacLeod, Robert Reed, Robert Silverberg, Brian Stableford, Michael Swanwick, Howard Waldrop, Sean Williams & Simon Brown, Walter Jon Williams and others; three of the stories are from *Interzone* – Egan's "Reasons to Be Cheerful," Peter F. Hamilton's novella "Escape Route" and Alastair Reynolds's "A Spy in Europa"; recommended, as ever.) 30th June 1998.

Drake, David. **Queen of Demons.** "The second epic volume in the grand saga begun in *Lard of the Isles*." Tor, ISBN 0-312-86468-X, 480pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) August 1998.

Duane, Diane. **On Her Majesty's Wizardly Service.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-69330-4, 309pp, hardcover, cover by Mick Posen, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; this appears to be a sequel to the author's cat-fantasy, *The Book of Night with Moon* [1997], rather than to her earlier "Wizardry" series of juvenile novels; an example of what *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* calls "gaslight romance," it's set in Victorian England, and a young Conan Doyle appears as one of the characters.) 16th July 1998.

Dunn, J. R. **Days of Cain.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79049-1, 361pp, A-format paperback, \$3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 126; it generally received very good reviews; this is a "special price" edition, worth picking up despite the near-illegibility of the back-cover copy.) June 1998.

Eddings, David and Leigh. **Polgara the Sorceress.** "The companion novel to *Belgarath the Sorcerer*." Voyager, ISBN 0-586-21314-7, 807pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1997; it was a "Sunday Times #1 bestseller," the publishers inform us.) 6th July 1998.

Eddings, David and Leigh. **The Rivan Codex: Ancient Texts of The Belgariad and The Malloreon.** Illustrated by Geoff Taylor. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224677-5, 394pp, hardcover, cover by Taylor, £19.99. (Illustrated companion to the Eddings' various fantasy series, first edition [?]; it consists of a short "autobiography" of the character Belgarath the Sorcerer, together with various "holy books," "histories," "gospels" and other matter pertaining to his imaginary world; in his introduction, written in a style reminiscent of Robert A. Heinlein at his grouchiest ["My private life is just that – private – and it's going to stay that way"] David Eddings condescends to "Papa Tolkien" and then tells us the tale of how he decided to become a fantasy writer in middle age: "I was in a bookstore going in the general direction of the 'serious fiction.' I passed the science-fiction rack and spotted one of the volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*. I muttered, 'Is this old turkey still floating around?' Then I picked it up and noticed that it was in its seventy-eighth printing!!! That got my immediate attention.") 6th July 1998.

Egan, Greg. **Diaspora.** Millennium, ISBN 0-75280-925-3, 376pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1997; one of last year's best sf novels, about a future solar system of "fleshers" [human beings] and "polises" [intelligent software]; reviewed by Brian Stableford in *Interzone* 125 – he thought it was wonderful.) 6th July 1998.

Feintuch, David. **The Still.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-597-5, 578pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997;

this is not another volume in the author's Hornblower-like "Seafort Saga" space-opera series, but his first attempt at a large-scale secondary-world fantasy.) 2nd July 1998.

Ferriss, Lucy. **The Misconceiver.** Sceptre, ISBN 0-340-70831-X, 303pp, C-format paperback, cover by Rod Holt, £10. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997; another example of "mainstream" sf, it's set in an authoritarian near future, "after the repeal of the abortion laws in 2011"; *Elle* magazine called it "a riveting dystopic tale"; the author is American, and this is her fourth novel.) Late entry: published some time earlier this year, but an A-format edition was due out on 27th August 1998.

Gemmell, David. **In the Realm of the Wolf: A Drenai Saga Adventure.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-40798-9, 306pp, A-format paperback, cover by Royo, \$6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK as *Waylander II*, 1992.) 1st June 1998.

Girardi, Robert. **Vaporetto 13.** Sceptre, ISBN 0-340-70717-8, 197pp, C-format paperback, £10. (Literary horror novel, first published in the USA, 1997; set in Venice, it's described by the publicist as "an elegantly sinister ghost story"; the author is American, and this is his third novel; the first two, *Madeleine's Ghost* and *The Pirate's Daughter*, sound as though they may also have horror-gothicky qualities.) Late entry: published some time earlier this year, but an A-format edition was due out on 23rd July 1998.

Goodkind, Terry. **Temple of the Winds.** Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-550-8, 528pp, C-format paperback, cover by Keith Parkinson, £11.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; this is "Book Four of *The Sword of Truth*," although the British publishers seem reluctant to tell us so; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 128.) 19th June 1998.

Greenland, Colin. **Mother of Plenty.** "Book Three of the Tabitha Jute Trilogy." Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-78776-8, 470pp, A-format paperback, cover by J. K. Potter, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a pre-publication extract appeared in *Interzone* 132.) June 1998.

Greenland, Colin. **Mother of Plenty.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-649907-4, 451pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998.) 6th July 1998.

Gross, Philip. **Psylicon Beach.** Scholastic Press, ISBN 0-590-19808-4, 184pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. (Juvenile sf/fantasy collection, first edition; this looks to be interestingly outré stuff – freaky lit. for kids; as the blurb has it, "get washed up on Psylicon Beach, the toxic landscape of the future... inhabited by ratkids... it's a junkshop of dreams, stolen souls and virtual truths.") June 1998.

Hale, Terry, ed. **The Dedalus Book of French Horror: The 19th Century.** Translated by Terry Hale and Liz Heron.

Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-87-9, 361pp, B-format paperback, £9.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; an interesting volume: according to Hale's introduction, every effort has been made to avoid the "well-beaten track" and 19 of the 24 stories have never been translated into English before now; authors include Charles Baudelaire, Alexandre Dumas, Erckman-Chatrian, Théophile Gautier, J.-K. Huysmans, Jean Lorrain, Guy de Maupassant, Catulle Mendès, Gérard de Nerval, Charles Nodier, the Marquis de Sade, Frédéric Soulié, Eugène Sue and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam.) 14th July 1998.

Jefferies, Mike. **The Siege of Candlebane Hall.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648219-8, 325pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it appears to be the sixth in the "Elundium" series.) 6th July 1998.

Kalu, Peter. **Black Star Rising.** The X Press [6 Hoxton Square, London N1 6NU], ISBN 1-874509-53-0, 238pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first edition; the publishers seem to be promoting this author, who lives in Manchester, as the black Jeff Noon: "Boldly going where no other black writer has gone before, Peter Kalu has written the UK's first 'cyber noir' novel"; there is also a brief endorsement by the poet Benjamin Zephaniah, who says: "Peter Kalu's body is connected to the first imagination to see space and science fiction through afro-centric eyes"; good, we think – we could do with a black British sf writer of talent; but it's a pity the publishers have to spoil our hopes slightly by telling us that *Black Star Rising* is the author's third "sci-fi book," the previous two being *Lick Shot* [1993] and *Professor X* [1995]; so why haven't we heard of those books before?; perhaps because they were really crime novels, featuring "the black futuristic detective Ambrose Patterson... currently being made into a TV series.") 8th June 1998.

Kerr, Katharine. **The Red Wyvern: Book One of the Dragon Mage.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-647860-3, 403pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; a new "Deverry" novel.) 20th July 1998.

Kessel, John. **Corrupting Dr Nice.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06611-3, 287pp, hardcover, cover by Max Schindler, £16.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 120: "delightful, dizzily but ruthlessly plotted, it is a time-travel novel like no other"; Ursula Le Guin and Kim Stanley Robinson say similar things about it on the back cover of this edition.) 16th July 1998.

Kilworth, Garry. **Castle Storm: Book Two of The Welkin Weasels.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-54547-3, 381pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £4.99. (Juvenile animal fantasy novel, first edition.) August 1998.



King, Stephen. **Bag of Bones**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-71819-6, 516pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received; this advance copy of King's latest opus is quite an object in itself, obviously designed to be a valuable collectors' item: it comes in a cardboard case, it has a shiny silver cover, and it has one of those short "Dear Bookseller" introductions by the author [see also Neil Gaiman's latest US paperback, below] which obviously will not be in the finished book; King says: "I wanted to write at least one more really good scary story before hitting the big five-oh... I also wanted to write about my Maine again"; the resulting thriller seems to contain a great deal of literary name-dropping – Somerset Maugham in the first chapter, Thomas Hardy and Herman Melville on the last page, with many others name-checked in between.) 27th August 1998.

King, Stephen. **Wizard and Glass**. "The Dark Tower." Illustrated by Dave McKean. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-69662-1, xvi+84Spp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; the fourth, and biggest, book in King's long-gestating "Dark Tower" sequence, following *The Gunslinger*, *The Drowning of the Three* and *The Waste Londs*; reviewed by Peter Crowther in *Interzone* 127.) 2nd July 1998.

Lawhead, Stephen R. **Grahl: Book Five in the Pendragon Cycle**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-78104-2, viii+38Spp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; this is the last volume in the series by this British-based American author: it began some years ago with *Toliesin*, *Merlin*, *Arthur* and *Pendragon*, all first issued by Christian publishing houses in the USA and UK.) June 1998.

Lawhead, Stephen. **The Iron Lance**. "The Celtic Crusades, Book One." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224665-1, 499pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received; Lawhead drops his "R" again for his second big book from HarperCollins; like the previous one, *Byzantium* [1996], it's more straight historical than fantastical, by the looks of it, though it may have some time-slippage element to the plot.) 21st September 1998.

Laws, Stephen. **Chasm**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-66611-0, 546pp, hardcover, cover by Jon Blake, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; concerning the tribulations of a town, most of which disappears into a huge crevasse; Laws's tenth novel: his publishers are now touting him as the "crown prince of British horror.") 3rd July 1998.

Leiber, Fritz. **The Dealings of Daniel Kesserich: A Study of the Mass-Insanity at Smithville**. Illustrated by Jason van Hollander. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86622-4, 125pp, trade paperback, \$9.95.

(Sf/horror novella, first published in 1997; written in 1936, when the 26-year-old Leiber was in close correspondence with H. P. Lovecraft, this is the apprentice's tribute to the master's style; apparently the never-published manuscript, revised by Leiber for likely publication in *Unknown* in the early 1940s, before that magazine's sudden demise, was mislaid in the 1950s and only came to light after the author's death.) June 1998.

McAuley, Paul J. **Child of the River: The First Book of Confluence**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97515-7, 306pp, hardcover, cover by Liz Kenyon, \$14. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1997; reviewed by Brian Stableford in *Interzone* 125; this is one of Avon's small-format, commendably cheap hardcovers – an attractive hardcover at a trade-paperback price.) Late entry: 6th May publication, received in June 1998.

McCarthy, Wil. **Bloom**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-40857-8, 310pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this scientist-author's fifth novel, it's hard sf about "nanotechnology gone wrong.") September 1998.

Mixon, Laura J. **Proxies**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85467-6, 444pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; although it concerns space travel, the story is set mainly in a "near-future American Southwest scorched by global warming"; the "proxies" of the title, according to the blurb, are "human-shaped machines guided by faraway pilots.") September 1998.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **The Chaos Balance**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-S66-S, 596pp, A-format paperback, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; the seventh "Recluce" novel.) 2nd July 1998.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **The Parafait War**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-558-4, 471pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Murphy, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) 4th June 1998.

Nagata, Linda. **Vast**. Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-S7630-S, 404pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author's fourth novel, following [but not a sequel to] *The Bohr Maker*, *Tech-Heaven* and a third which we never saw, *Deception Well*.) 10th August 1998.

Parker, K. J. **Colours in the Steel: Volume One of the Fencer Trilogy**. "A major new fantasy of intrigue, war and magic." Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-SS7-6, 503pp, C-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut work by a new British writer, apparently male.) 4th June 1998.

Payne, Michael H. **The Blood Jaguar**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86783-2, 256pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Animal fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut book by a new American writer; a note on the

copyright page states that an earlier version "ran as a serial in www.tomorrowst.com electronic magazine.") December 1998.

Reichert, Mickey Zucker. **The Children of Wrath: The Renshai Chronicles, Part Two** [sic: it's actually volume three]. Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-445-S, xii+516pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £11.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; follow-up to *Beyond Rognarok* and *Prince of Demons*; "Mickey Zucker Reichert" is the form of her name used by American doctor and writer Miriam S. Zucker.) 19th June 1998.

Saberhagen, Fred. **Shiva in Steel**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86326-8, 318pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's a "thrilling new instalment in the acclaimed Berserker series," and it begins: "Five thousand light-years from old Earth, on an airless planetoid code-named Hyperborea...") September 1998.

Shea, Robert, and Robert Anton Wilson. **The Illuminatus! Trilogy: The Eye in the Pyramid, The Golden Apple, and Leviathan**. "A cult classic – over 100,000 copies sold!" Raven, ISBN 1-85487-S74-4, 805pp, B-format paperback, £9.99. (Humorous, conspiratorial, crime/sf/fantasy omnibus, first published in one volume in 1984; the three novels originally appeared as separate volumes in 1975.) 10th July 1998.

Smith, Michael Marshall. **One of Us**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-225600-2, 307pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf/crime novel, first edition; Smith's third novel, it's set in America in the near future; as with his earlier books, it's being marketed primarily as a thriller for the laity [no "M"] Banks and Jeff Noon crowd – i.e. those who wouldn't be seen dead reading "sci-fi" or anything on HarperCollins's "Voyager" list.) 20th July 1998.

Stewart, Paul. **The Hanging Tree**. Point Horror, ISBN 0-590-11164-7, 214pp, A-format paperback, £3.50. (Juvenile horror novel, first edition; this is one of a loose series, "Point Horror Unleashed," by British writers [as opposed to the American reprints, by Diane Hoh and the like, which form the bulk of Scholastic's "Point Horror" list] consisting of original novels by Peter Beere, Philip Gross, Jenny Jones, Graham Masterton, Celia Rees and others: we have not been sent them all [as usual, for some odd reason, the excellent Jenny Jones slips through the net – *Sod's Law*], although we saw the Masterton, *House of Bones*, a few months ago.) June 1998.

Swanwick, Michael. **Jack Faust**. Orion, ISBN 0-75281-646-2, 325pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf/historical fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; one of the best books of last year; reviewed, glowingly, by Brian Stableford in *Interzone* 125.) 15th June 1998.

Turtledove, Harry. **How Few Remain**. "A Novel of the Second War Between the

States." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-40614-1, 596pp, A-format paperback, \$7.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997.) 1st June 1998.

Turtledove, Harry. **How Few Remain.** "The epic novel of the second American Civil War." New English Library, ISBN 0-340-71541-3, 474pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £6.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997; the print in this version is minuscule: you'll get less eyestrain from the Del Rey edition, above.) 16th July 1998.

Turtledove, Harry. **A World of Difference.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-71270-8, 308pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1989; this is a misleading item: the publishers assign it a 1998 copyright, but in fact it's quite an old Turtledove novel, although not previously published in the UK; the title had been used before, by the British writer Robert Conquest, for an sf novel published in 1955.) 16th July 1998.

Bear, Greg. **Foundation and Chaos.** "The Second Foundation Trilogy. Authored by the Estate of Isaac Asimov." Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-562-2, 342pp, hardcover, cover by Fred Gambino, £16.99. (Sf sharecrop novel, first published in the USA [?], 1998; it's set in the universe of Asimov's "Foundation" stories and is the second of a trilogy being written by separate hands: the other volumes are Gregory Benford's *Foundation's Fear*, 1997, and a forthcoming volume by David Brin.) 2nd July 1998.

Benford, Gregory. **Foundation's Fear.** "The Second Foundation Trilogy. Authored by the Estate of Isaac Asimov." Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-563-0, 608pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf sharecrop novel, first published in the USA [?], 1997; first of the trilogy set in the universe of Asimov's "Foundation" stories; reviewed by Nigel Brown in *Interzone* 123.) 2nd July 1998.

Gaiman, Neil. **Neverwhere.** "National bestseller." Avon, ISBN 0-380-78901-9, 388pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Fantasy TV-serial novelization, first published in the UK, 1996; proof copy received; based on Gaiman's own TV script, this is the American version of the book, first published as an Avon hardcover in 1997, with revised text and no mention of the BBC serial; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 126; this "advance reading copy" of the mass-market paperback, bedecked with the usual list of star endorsements [Tori Amos, Clive Barker, Poppy Z. Brite, Mark Frost, Stephen King, Peter Straub, etc.], also contain Gaiman's short story "Smoke and Mirrors" at the rear, together with a short extract from a new novel, *Stardust*, promised for January 1999 hardcover publication, and a brief, amusing intro by the author [presumably not to be in the final paperback] which begins, "Dear Book-seller," and ends, "I have the honor to style

VanderMeer, Jeff, and Rose Secret, eds. **Leviathan 2: The Legacy of Boccaccio.** The Ministry of Whimsy Press [PO Box 4248, Tallahassee, FL 32315, USA], ISBN 1-890464-03-1, 183pp, trade paperback, cover by Duane Bray, \$10.99. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; this nicely-produced small-press item contains four original novellas by Richard Calder, Rhys Hughes, L. Timmel Duchamp and Stepan Chapman [the last-named is the most recent winner of the Philip K. Dick Award, for his 1997 novel *The Troika*, published by this same press]; there is also a two-page introduction by Jeff VanderMeer and a six-page essay, "Some Thoughts on the Novella," by David Pringle.) No date shown: received in June 1998.

Weis, Margaret, and Tracy Hickman. **Nightword: A Starshield Novel.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-39762-2, 451pp, hardcover, cover by Jean Targete, \$24.95. (Science-fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *Starshield: Sentinels* [1996]; yet more space-operatics from these well-known fantasy writers.) 17th June 1998.

Wells, Martha. **The Death of the Necromancer.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97334-0, 359pp, hardcover, cover by Liz Kenyon, \$23. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it seems to be an example of what *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* calls "gaslight romance"; a third book, and a change of publisher, for this writer who has been praised by people like C. J. Cherryh, "Robin Hobb" and Sean Russell.) 10th June 1998.

Williams, Tad. **River of Blue Fire: Otherland, Volume Two.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-599-1, xix+634pp, hardcover, cover by Michael Whelan, £16.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1998.) 2nd July 1998.

Yarbro, Chelsea Quinn. **Blood Roses: A Novel of Saint-Germain.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86529-5, 382pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Historical horror/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's set at the time of the Black Death and the "blood roses" of the title are the pustules caused by that plague.) October 1998.

the Fifth Doctor, Nyssa and Tegan.") 6th July 1998.

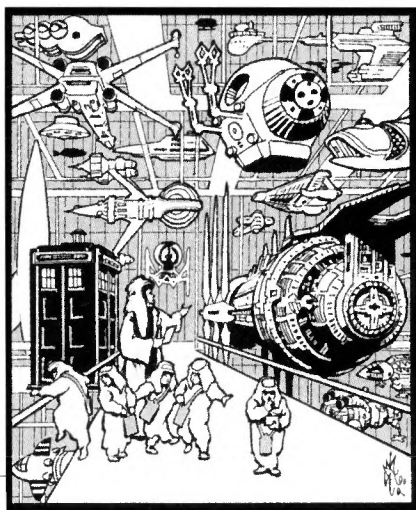
Mortimore, Jim. **The Sword of Forever.** "The New Adventures." Virgin, ISBN 0-426-20526-X, 293pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mike Posen, £5.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, featuring the galactic adventures of Bernice Summerfield [a former associate of Doctor Who]; first edition; the plot-synopsis is worth quoting: "When Bernice Summerfield finds human skull fragments containing her own DNA in the stomach of a mummified dinosaur, she embarks on a trail of murder and betrayal. From the alien jungles of France to the primeval continent of Pangaea, the trail leads ever further back in time. Together with Patience, the cloned smart-raptor, Benny must brave alien hybrids, agents of the Knights Templar guarding a secret older than time – and have breakfast with the man who would be Emperor of Earth.") 18th June 1998.

Russell, Gary. **Placebo Effect.** "Doctor Who." BBC Books, 0-563-40587-2, 279pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; "featuring the Eighth Doctor and Sam," it's set on a planet called Micawber's World – a Dickens reference?) 6th July 1998.

Windling, Terri, and Delia Sherman, eds. **The Essential Bordertown: A Traveller's Guide to the Edge of Faerie.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86593-7, 383pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Shared-world fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; a sequel volume to the earlier "Borderland" series of anthologies and novels conceived by Terri Windling, it contains all-new stories in "elfpunk" mode by Steven Brust, Charles de Lint, Ellen Kushner, Patricia A. McKillip, Felicity Savage, Delia Sherman, Midori Snyder, Caroline Stevermer and several others.) August 1998.

Spinoffery

This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and shorecrops (including non-fiction about shored worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.



myself, and to remain, Your most obedient servant, Neil Gaiman"; clearly Avon are giving this the hard push: nothing succeeds like success.) November 1998.

Messingham, Simon. **Zeta Major.** "Doctor Who." BBC Books, 0-563-40597-X, 282pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; "featuring



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INTERZONE numbers 25 to 114, Million 1 to 14 (complete). Offers to Blundell, 27 Arnold Way, Thame, Oxon. OX29 2QA.

MILLION: The Magazine About Popular Fiction. All back issues, nos. 1 to 14, 1991-1993 (including a handful of the rare no. 2 obtained from a book-dealer), are still available at the reduced price of £1.50 each inland (£2 each overseas) from Interzone, 217 Preston Drove, Brighton BN1 6FL, UK. Please make your cheques or POs payable to Interzone (e-mail interzone@cix.co.uk if more details required).

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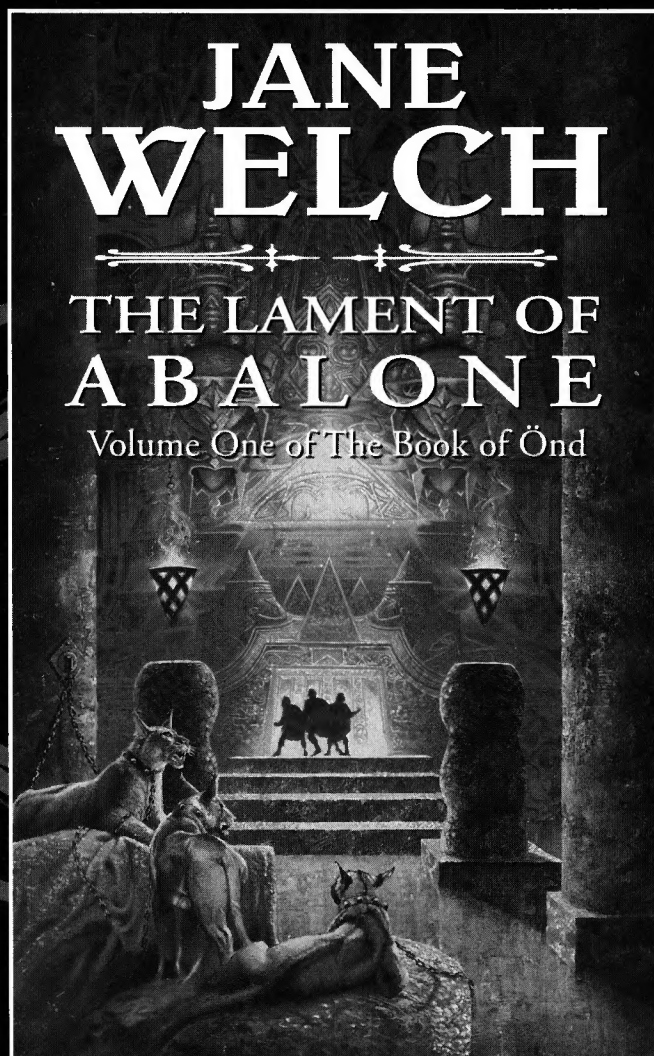
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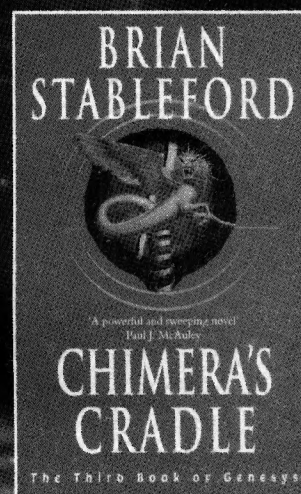
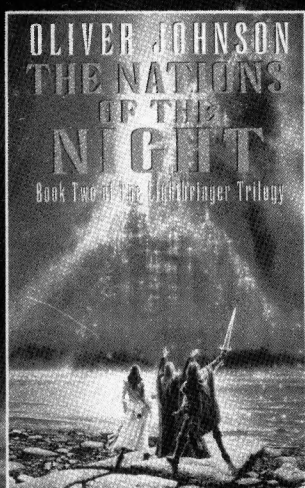
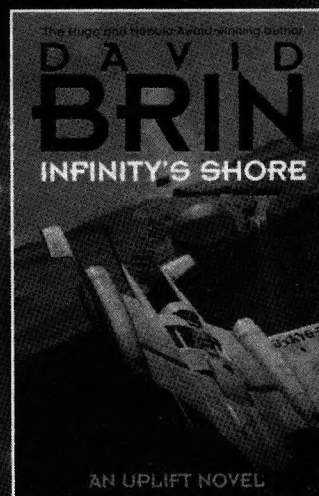
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